

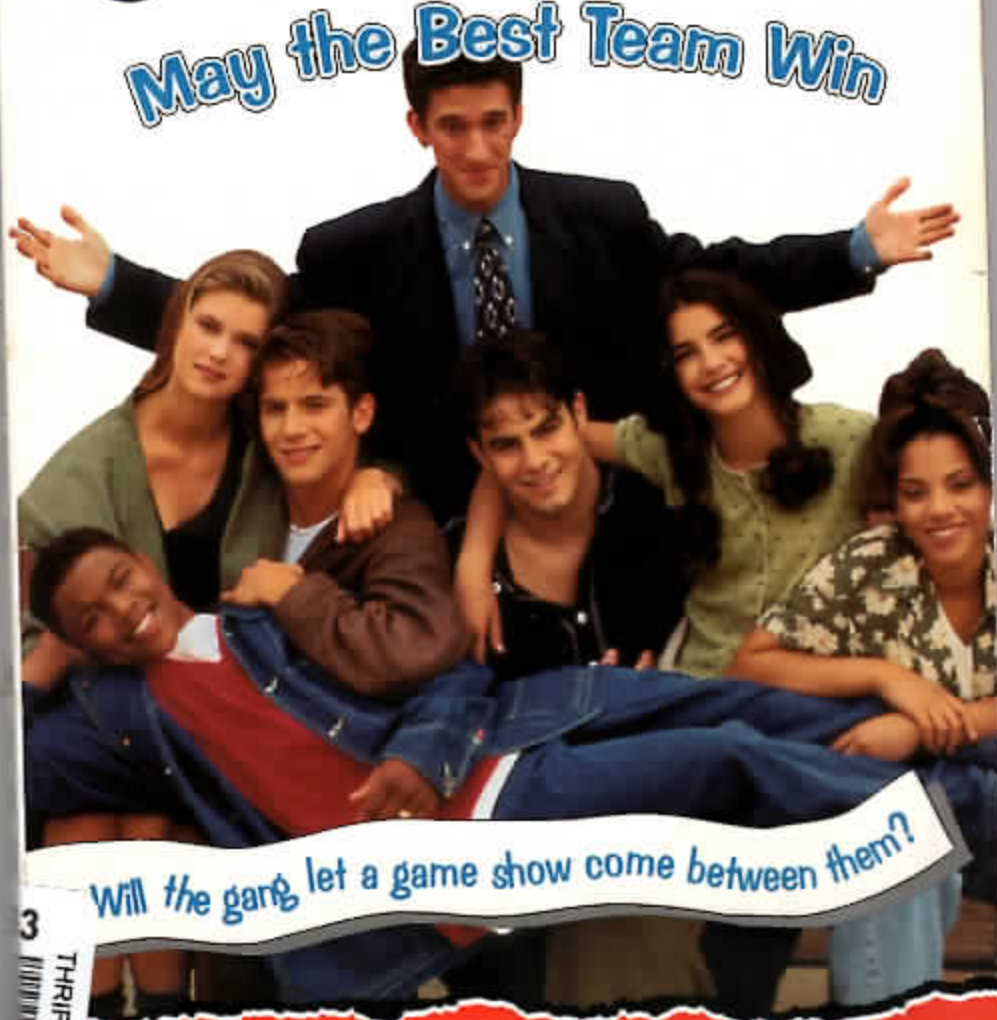
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#7

May the Best Team Win



Will the gang let a game show come between them?

3

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by Beth Cruise

May the Best Team Win



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May the Best Team Win

by Beth Cruise

ALADDIN PAPERBACKS

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To great teams everywhere

chapter



"It's totally hilarious," Lindsay Warner said. She pushed her long brown hair over her shoulder. "I can't believe you haven't watched it."

"You haven't?" Rachel Meyers asked, glancing up from her half-painted fingernails. Rachel had long blond hair and big blue eyes. She was totally obsessed with her looks. "What's wrong with you?"

"I've been busy," Megan Jones replied. She looked up from her biology textbook. Lying on her stomach on the floor in Lindsay's bedroom, Megan was doing what she usually did after school—homework. "It's called studying."

"I study, too," Lindsay put in. Even though Megan was the top student in their class at Bayside High, Lindsay wasn't too far behind. She spent a lot of time doing schoolwork, too—when she wasn't hanging out with her boyfriend, Tommy DeLuca.

"But once you see this show, you're going to watch it every day, just like we do," Lindsay added, straightening her skirt. It was new, and she loved the tiny flowers on it.

"I doubt it," Megan said. "I'm not the game-show type."

"You will be once you see the host," Rachel turned up the television volume. The opening jingle for *Smarts and Strength* had just started to play.

"This looks like some cheesy local production," Megan said. "Where's it from, anyway?"

"They tape it right over at the KBAY studios," Lindsay said.

The three girls watched as Skip Simon, the host of the show, jogged onto the stage. He was dressed in his usual game-show-host outfit: a pair of black-and-white sweatpants, high-top sneakers, a black tuxedo jacket with a pocket protector and loads of pencils, and a tie. He looked ridiculous. But his outfit reflected the split aspect of the show. It was part athletics, part brainpower.

"That guy's cute," Megan said. "He doesn't know how to dress, but—"

"He's more than cute," Rachel crooned. She almost painted the carpet with nail polish as she gazed at the screen. "Look at his blue eyes, his dimples, his biceps. . . . He's practically a Greek god."

"Hello, everyone, and welcome to *Smarts and*

Strength!" Skip Simon crowed as he smiled at the camera. His teeth were so straight and polished, he looked like somebody on a toothpaste commercial. "The question we have to ask our two teams today is . . . are you as strong as you think?" He winked at the audience, and they cheered.

"Get it?" Lindsay asked Megan, scooting up on the bed. "You have to be strong *and* smart."

"Yeah, I get it," Megan said. "Kind of corny."

"Just give it a chance," Lindsay urged.

"Yeah, and keep your eye on Skip," Rachel said dreamily. "I think he's using a new styling gel. He's got extra body today."

Lindsay and Megan exchanged a look. Rachel tended to get carried away about things—especially clothes, makeup, and guys.

On the screen, a contestant from each team was running through a complicated obstacle course. A skinny boy tripped on a row of tires as a strong-looking girl raced across the finish line. Minutes later, the skinny boy was answering a string of academic questions, racking up points for his team.

"I *do* get it," Megan declared as a tiny girl tried to lift a barbell over her head. "The point is to try and look ridiculous."

"She might look ridiculous now," Lindsay said, "but that girl's gotten tons of points for her team. They've been on for three straight days."

"But she just lost twenty points," Megan said.

"As long as she can make it up with the academic questions, it doesn't matter," Lindsay explained. "That's why they call it *Smarts and Strength*."

"They ought to call it *Skip Simon, Hunk-o-Matic*," Rachel said with a sigh.

A few minutes later, there was a station break, and Skip Simon appeared.

"For all you kids out there watching, I've got special, special news!" he announced.

"Special?" Megan rolled her eyes. "This guy is a complete dork."

"Hey," Rachel objected. "It's in the script. He didn't write it. See? He's reading off the cue cards."

"I'd like to announce an all-new competition. *Smarts and Strength* presents the High School Games! At the end of this week, we'll be coming to your school, looking for teams to compete on our show. The grand prize is an all-expenses-paid week-end trip to San Francisco for six lucky winners who are as strong as they think!" The studio audience cheered. "We'll be right back after these messages."

"High school—that's us!" Lindsay exclaimed, jumping off her bed. "I wonder if they're coming to—"

"Check it out!" Megan pointed at the TV screen. A list of high schools and dates appeared, along with a telephone number to call for more information. "Bayside—on Thursday! That's only four days away!"

Lindsay raised an eyebrow. "I thought you said this show was stupid."

"Maybe I did at first," Megan admitted. Her dark brown eyes glimmered with excitement. "But we've got a perfect team. The three of us and Tommy, Brian, and Bobby. We can do better than these teams. And if we win—"

"Who cares about winning?" Rachel asked. She waved her hands through the air to dry the nail polish. "We'll get to hang out with Skip."

"And we might get to go to San Francisco!" Lindsay added.

"Right," Megan agreed. "You and I can answer the academic questions, Tommy and Brian are good at sports—"

"Bobby's a real sports trivia buff," Lindsay put in. "That'll come in very handy."

Megan nodded. "And Rachel, you . . ." She tapped her chin.

Besides being clothes and makeup crazy, Megan couldn't think of anything Rachel was especially good at. She was a C student. And other than cheer-leading, she'd never played on any sports teams.

"I'll do everything else!" Rachel happily volunteered. "Besides, I've been on TV before, so it'll help to have a team member with on-camera experience."

"When were you on TV?" Megan asked.

"Remember those ads I did for that jeans store?"

Rachel said. "I was only six, but I still remember the lights, the cameras, the action . . ."

"Let's call KBAY for the details," Megan said. "Then we can track down the guys. They're probably at the Max." She looked up at Rachel, but her friend's face was stricken with panic.

"What's the matter, Rachel?" Lindsay asked.

Rachel put a hand up to her forehead. "I'm finally going to meet Skip, and I don't have anything to wear!" she moaned.

o o o

Brian Keller took a sip of his soda. He looked like he was hanging out with his friends at the Max. But Brian was secretly waiting for Rachel to walk through the door. He was sure she'd stop by eventually. And he really didn't mind waiting for her. He was getting kind of used to it, since he'd been interested in her for months.

He looked around the gang's favorite hangout. Then he quickly checked his reflection in the chrome napkin dispenser. He wanted to make sure he looked his best. As if I need to worry, he told himself, running his fingers through his sandy brown hair. With a satisfied sigh, he sat back and relaxed.

"So how's the job search going?" Tommy DeLuca asked. He took a sip of cola, then crunched an ice cube in his mouth. Tommy was tall with dark brown

hair and sideburns. He was on the Bayside football team, and a genius at repairing cars.

"I haven't officially started looking yet," Brian said. "But tomorrow I'm going to pound the pavement." Brian wanted to make some money so he could buy a new mountain bike. Not only would it impress Rachel, it would be good for transportation.

"I don't want to get a job until I absolutely have to," Bobby said. He pulled his baseball cap down over his short, curly brown hair. "Then I'm going to retire when I turn thirty."

"What are you going to be?" Brian asked, hiding a smirk. "A rock star?"

"A baseball star," Bobby replied seriously. "And everybody knows those guys are over the hill at twenty-eight."

Tommy and Brian shook their heads as Lindsay, Rachel, and Megan rushed into the restaurant.

"Hey, guys, great news!" Lindsay greeted as she slid into the booth next to Tommy. "You know that show, *Smarts and Strength*?"

"Uh . . . yeah," Tommy said. "I think so."

"I've seen it a couple of times," Brian said.

"Me, too," said Bobby. "Why?"

"We're going to be on it!" Rachel said excitedly.

Tommy folded his muscular arms across his chest. "Could you repeat that?" he asked doubtfully.

"They're having a competition for high school

teams," Lindsay explained. "There's a tryout on Thursday to see which team will represent Bayside."

"Then we go on TV against other high schools," Lindsay continued. "If we keep winning, we stay on the show until we're in the finals, and then—"

"When we win, we get an all-expenses-paid trip to San Francisco!" Megan finished triumphantly.

"Exactly," Lindsay said breathlessly. "So what do you guys think?" She turned toward Tommy.

Tommy shifted slightly, and the red leather seat creaked. "Sounds good to me. I'm all over that obstacle course. But don't expect me to spit out the Pyth . . . Pythag . . . Pythonag—"

"Pythagorean theorem," Megan said. "Don't worry. That's what I'm there for. As long as we each help with what we're best at, we'll be great!"

"I hope they have a lot of sports questions," Bobby said.

"I hope we end up in San Francisco," Brian added. "Ever since I got to California, I've been wanting to see the Bay Area. One of my friends in Switzerland went there on spring break, and it was all he talked about for a month." He grinned at Rachel. "It'll be fun to go on a trip together, won't it?"

"You don't have to convince me. I'd give up eyeliner for a *week* to meet Skip Simon," Rachel said.

"You have a crush on the host?" Bobby asked.

"It's not just a crush," Rachel declared. "It's *love*."

"Actually . . . now that I think about it, I don't know if I'm going to have time to be on the show," Brian said. "If going on TV meant watching Rachel swoon over some other guy, he wasn't interested. 'If I get a job . . .'"

"You're not going to work *every* day of your life," Megan said. "You can ask for a few hours off."

"And it's not like you have a job already," Bobby pointed out. "You don't even know if you'll get one."

"Thanks a lot," Brian frowned. His afternoon was getting worse by the minute.

"Come on, you guys, this is no time to argue," Megan said. "We need to pull it together as a team or we're never going to make it on the show."

"Right," Lindsay agreed. "The only way we'll win is if we work as a team."

"And just think," Rachel put in, "if we get to be on the show more than once, Skip will really notice us. I mean, we might get to know him and then—"

"Rachel, have you noticed that Skip Simon is, like, thirty-five years old?" Bobby asked.

"Yeah, he's a little too old for you, I think," Brian added. "About a couple of decades too old."

"Actually"—Rachel flipped her long blond hair over her shoulder—"he's only twenty-six. I just read about him in the Sunday news magazine."

Great, Brian thought. Rachel was in love with a

game-show host. "What's his astrological sign?" he muttered.

"Leo," Rachel answered. "Well, actually, he's on the cusp between Leo and Virgo."

"What's his favorite color?" Bobby asked.

"Red," Rachel said. She brushed a piece of lint off her freshly painted red nails and frowned. "I'll have to put on a fresh coat."

"Too bad the questions won't be about Skip Simon's personal life," Megan commented. "You'd score a hundred points."

Brian looked at Rachel and sighed. The last thing he needed was for her to have a crush on an older man. Okay, so maybe he'd kind of messed things up between them recently when he tried to date two girls at the same time. Still, it didn't mean Rachel had to ditch him for some game-show host. Girls!

"Do we have to sign up or something?" Bobby asked.

"Lindsay and I already sent in our names using the fax modem on my dad's computer," Megan told them.

"Have I ever told you how much I admire intelligence in a girl?" Bobby asked.

Megan rolled her eyes. Even though she was dating Dave Williams, Bobby still mooned over her whenever he got the chance. Especially since his girlfriend, Grizelda, had moved away. "Only about a thousand times," she said.

Bobby just kept grinning at her stupidly.

"And have I ever told you how much I admire you, period?" Tommy scooted over closer to Lindsay.

"Tell me again," Lindsay said, smiling at him.

"If this is going to turn into Love Night at the Max, I might as well go home," Brian complained.

"Yeah, I thought we were here to plan our strategy," Megan added. "We've got to put Bayside on the map." She pounded her fist on the tabletop.

"And then it's off to San Francisco," Brian said, gazing at Rachel. In San Francisco, he'd get her to forget about Skip Simon. They'd ride a cable car, dine at a cozy restaurant, take a walk by the bay. . . .

Rachel sighed. "And by then, I'll know Skip."

Brian just looked at Lindsay and shook his head. Nothing could distract Rachel from Skip tonight.

"Don't worry," Lindsay told Brian softly. "She'll get over it."

Brian wasn't so sure.

chapter

2

"Sorry, we're not looking for help right now." Brian sighed and headed toward the door. How many times had he heard that today? He'd been to ten different fast-food places, and none of them was hiring. Or at least not hiring him.

"It's useless," Brian muttered as he pushed open the door. He was never going to get a job. He was never going to get that mountain bike. Outside, Brian paused in front of Pickin' Chicken. It was his favorite fast-food place in town besides the Max—he loved their Super Spicy Spuds. He decided to go in and grab a bag. Maybe while he was eating, he'd think of something.

A few minutes later Brian was sitting down with an order of Super Spicy Spuds. He popped one into his mouth. There. He felt better already.

Okay. So maybe I won't find a job today. Or this week. It wouldn't be the end of the world. He'd have more time to hang out with his friends, and he wouldn't risk falling behind in school. Not to mention that he'd have more time to devote to his top-priority project: Rachel. If he could only get her to stop talking about Skip Simon for two seconds, he could ask her out this weekend. And once she remembered how much fun he was to hang around with, they'd be back on track.

"Hey, where should I put the sign?" the man behind the counter called to someone in the kitchen.

"Wherever it's visible," a short, wiry man replied. He wiped his hands on a yellow apron with a large chicken appliqué on it. "If we don't hire someone in the next few days, I'm going to lose my mind!"

Brian dropped the Spicy Spud that was halfway to his mouth back into the bag. He wiped his hands on a napkin and stood up. A second later he was at the counter. "Excuse me, sir. I couldn't help overhearing. Are you looking for help?"

"We sure are." The man with the apron gave Brian a critical look but held out his hand. "I'm Mr. Hansen, the owner and manager here. And you are?"

"Brian Keller," Brian replied. He shook the man's hand. "I'm looking for work, and this is one of my favorite restaurants. I come here every day."

"Really?" Mr. Hansen was starting to look inter-

ested. "And have you done restaurant work before?"

"Sort of," Brian said, fibbing. What was a little white lie when a mountain bike was on the line? "But we don't have anything as good as Pickin' Chicken back home in Switzerland."

"Switzerland, huh? And you've just moved here?" Mr. Hansen asked. He removed his Pickin' Chicken trademark cap, which had a long beak instead of a visor, and scratched his head.

"Right," Brian said. "My father was transferred here for work."

Mr. Hansen stopped scratching his head and put his beaked cap back on.

Brian eyed the hideous cap. *Do you really want to wear that ugly thing, Keller?* But the mountain bike flashed in his mind and a second later, he was talking again.

"I've been looking for a job, but I didn't bother asking here because you didn't have a sign up, and I figured there was no way I'd get to work at my favorite restaurant. So this is kind of a miracle, don't you think? You need help, I need work. . . ."

"Do you have any relevant experience?" Mr. Hansen started refilling the napkin dispenser.

Brian nodded. "Sure. I used to work at a camp."

"In the kitchen?"

Brian thought quickly. His major responsibility had been the tennis and volleyball courts. But all

experience was relevant, wasn't it? He'd manned the gas grill at barbecues. And anyway, it wasn't as if anyone was going to call Geneva and check on him. "I did a lot of kitchen work," he told Mr. Hansen.

"Such as?" Mr. Hansen prodded.

"Oh, everything," Brian ad-libbed. He thought of what his best friend at camp, Gunther, had done. "I was in charge of lunch—if there's a sandwich I don't know how to make, I'll be surprised." He smiled at Mr. Hansen. "There's even a Brian Keller sandwich at that camp. Two slices ham, one slice turkey—"

"What about fryers?" Mr. Hansen interrupted. "Any experience with that?"

"Sure," Brian said. "All the time. Those campers have to have their fries, you know."

"Hmm," Mr. Hansen tapped his chin.

"I'm very responsible. You can call the camp and check with them," Brian said.

Mr. Hansen frowned. "I don't exactly feel like calling Switzerland for a job reference," he said.

Phew, Brian thought.

"But you do seem responsible, and we need somebody right away. I'll start you out on a trial basis. At the end of two weeks, I'll evaluate your performance. If things are working out, great. If not, you'll have two weeks' pay, and I'll let you go."

"It's a deal," Brian said excitedly. It looked like he'd be buying that mountain bike before too long. So

he had to wear a uniform and a goofy-looking chicken cap for a few months. It'd be worth it. "You won't regret giving me a chance," he told Mr. Hansen.

"Good. Now, can you start tomorrow?"

"Sure," Brian said.

"Come by around three, and we'll work out your schedule," Mr. Hansen said. "Thanks . . . uh . . ."

"Brian. Brian Keller." He grinned. "By the way, do I get any discount on the food here now that I'm an employee? I could really go for another bag of these."

Mr. Hansen took a bag from under the warming lamps and handed it to Brian. "We give a fifty percent discount. But consider this a bonus. You just made this my lucky day."

"That makes two of us. Thanks!"

"Three o'clock tomorrow. Don't be late," Mr. Hansen called as Brian headed out the door.

I won't, Brian thought. The sooner he started work, the sooner he could show Rachel his new bike. Plus, he'd get all the food he wanted for half price. What could be better?

o o o

"It's great to finally catch up with you," Megan said. She plopped into a seat across from her boyfriend Dave at the Max. They'd just left their Science Club meeting and headed to the diner for some onion rings. "I feel like I haven't seen you in weeks."

"Well, it has been almost a week, really," Dave said. He sounded kind of distant. "Since we spent any time alone together, anyway."

Megan sighed. She loved having a boyfriend who was involved in so many things. But since she was the same way, they rarely had time for each other.

"Megan!"

She looked over at the door and saw Brian coming toward them, grinning from ear to ear. "Guess what?" he said. "I got a job! Hey, Dave."

"Hi, Brian," Dave replied.

"That's great!" Megan said. "Where?"

"Right across the street, at Pickin' Chicken," Brian said. "I know it's nothing glamorous—"

"I'll say. Are you actually going to wear one of those beaks on your head?" Megan asked.

Brian rolled his eyes. "I have to," he admitted. "But it'll be worth it—I'll have a new mountain bike before you know it."

"Whatever you say," Megan said. Then she remembered something. "Hey, this job isn't going to interfere with our tryout on Thursday, is it?"

"I'll make sure I get the afternoon off," Brian assured her. "Well, I've got to run. See you guys tomorrow!"

"What tryout?" Dave asked when Brian had left.

"Tryout?" Megan asked. "Oh—for *Smarts and Strength*."

"The game show?" Dave looked confused.

Megan nodded. "Didn't I tell you?"

Dave shook his head.

Megan stirred her yogurt shake with a spoon. She was suddenly feeling a little bit guilty. "Well, *Smarts and Strength* is going to have a high school competition next week, and we're trying out."

Dave stared down at his plate of onion rings. "Who's we?" he asked in a wooden voice.

"You know, the gang. Me, Lindsay, Tommy D., Bobby, Brian, and Rachel," Megan said. She had meant to tell Dave all about it, but it had slipped her mind. And now he seemed mad. "You didn't want to be on the team, did you? I mean, you're so busy all the time. . . ."

"It would have been nice to be asked," Dave said.

"Sorry," Megan said. "I guess I didn't think of it."

"I guess not," Dave replied. He folded his arms across his chest. "You're too busy with everything else to ask me to do things with you and your friends."

"It's not my fault I'm involved with stuff," Megan said. "I want to have fun and be successful—last time I checked, that wasn't a problem with you."

"Being ambitious is one thing—being ridiculous is another!" Dave retorted.

Megan glared at him. "Thanks, Dave. Thanks a lot."

"I just meant—"

"I know what you meant," Megan said. "And I'm sure you don't want to spend another minute with someone who's ridiculous when you have so many other important things to do."

"Megan, you can't do everything," he said.

"Yes, I can," Megan argued. She couldn't believe it. She'd never tell Dave that he couldn't accomplish something. That he shouldn't try. "Just watch me."

"Fine. I'll watch you from a distance." Dave tossed his napkin on the table. "This should cover the onion rings. Have a nice life." He dropped a dollar bill, and it fluttered onto the table.

"Don't worry, I will," Megan practically shouted. Who was he to say she couldn't do everything she wanted to? What was wrong with wanting to succeed at lots of different things? Isn't that what he wanted for himself, too? Sure, it was fine when he did well, but when she did. . . .

Megan took a deep breath. Maybe she should have asked him to be on their team. *And maybe I would have if he wasn't such a colossal jerk!*

Still, she couldn't help feeling a little sad when she realized she and Dave might never have another date again. She would miss him. A lot.

Fortunately, she didn't have any time to get depressed about it. Rachel came into the Max just as Megan was grabbing her jacket to go home.

"Megan! Just the person I was looking for," Rachel said breathlessly.

"Let me guess. You left your geometry homework until the last minute, and you need me to help you with a few proofs," Megan said, irritated.

"No. This is much more important," Rachel said. "I just remembered Skip Simon's favorite color's red. So I need you to come over to my house right now and help me decide whether to wear my red blazer, my red miniskirt, or my red—"

"Rachel. Skip Simon's not even going to be there on Thursday," Megan told her.

"But you don't know that for sure," Rachel said.

"No, but—"

"Then we can't assume anything," Rachel said. She grabbed Megan's arm. "And if I decide to wear the blazer, I need to take it to the dry cleaner tomorrow morning. We don't have any time to waste!"

3

"O kay, people," a tall woman with curly dark hair called. "People!" she shouted. But none of the students in the gym heard her. They were too busy laughing and talking.

A second later a loud piercing whistle echoed off the walls. The room grew silent. "That's better," the woman said with a grin. "My name is Alison Bridgeley, and I'm the producer of *Smarts and Strength*. We need to get started, so send your team captains over to talk with me."

"Team captain?" Tommy repeated. "We don't have a team captain."

"Should we take a vote?" Lindsay suggested.

"I have six teams signed up, and only five captains over here," Alison called out a second later.

"Who wants to be captain?" Bobby asked.

"Not me," Tommy said, holding up his hands.

"I might be too busy with my new job—"

"Oh, I'll do it," Megan said, interrupting Brian.

Lindsay stepped forward. "Don't you think we—"

"I'd better get over there before they disqualify us." Megan headed over to the group that was talking to the producer.

"Megan sure knows how to take charge," Tommy said, wrapping his arm around Lindsay's waist.

No kidding, Lindsay thought. A little too much.

Rachel marched over to Lindsay, looking very aggravated. "I can't believe it," she grumbled. Rachel was decked out in a red sweater, with her hair tied back in a large red ribbon. She even had red Keds sneakers on.

"Me, neither," Lindsay said. She thought Rachel was upset about Megan's actions.

"Can't believe that the whole wrestling team showed up?" Tommy asked. "Neither can I. Coach will never give them the time off from practice to be on the show. And there's no way they'll be able to answer those tough questions about chemistry."

"Well, look at *that* team," Brian said. He pointed to a familiar group of boys who all wore glasses that were too big—and pants that were too short. "If they can run across the gym once, I'll be surprised."

"That's not what I'm talking about!" Rachel cried.

throwing up her hands dramatically. "I'm talking about the fact that Skip Simon isn't here."

Everyone else in the group exchanged looks.

"Well, Skip has a show to tape this afternoon," Lindsay said. She patted Rachel's arm consolingly. If her friend didn't cheer up, she wasn't going to be any help in the tryout.

"He should have been here," Rachel complained. She jutted out her lower lip in a pout.

"If we win today, you'll see him next week when we appear on the show," Lindsay pointed out.

A huge smile spread across Rachel's face. "Right!" she said. "So when does this tryout start, anyway?"

o o o

"Go, Tommy!" Megan shouted.

"You can do it!" Brian yelled.

Tommy was high-stepping through the row of tires laid out on the gym floor. Beside him, a geek named Marvin Melvin stumbled and fell forward.

"Twenty-point-four seconds," Alison announced when Tommy crossed the finish line. "That gives group six another twenty-five points."

"All right!" Brian and Bobby exclaimed.

"We're ready for the last portion of the tryout," Alison said. "A few more academic questions, then we'll know which team is the winner."

"Aren't we way ahead?" Megan asked Lindsay.

There was no scoreboard, but the gang had been doing really well.

"I think so," Lindsay whispered excitedly. "But we've still got to tackle these questions."

Megan nodded. After her fight with Dave, she was more determined than ever to win. She'd show him.

"Please remember not to shout out the answer," Alison said. She raised an eyebrow at the team of wrestlers. "Ring the bell in front of you, and I'll call on whoever rings first." She shuffled through a stack of index cards. "Okay. Here's your first question. What land negotiation took place in 1803 and more than doubled the size of the United States?"

Before she had even finished reciting the question, the team of brains was ringing the bell. Alison acknowledged their captain, Marvin, who gave the team's answer for the team each time. "The Louisiana Purchase," he said in a nasal voice.

"Correct," Alison said. "For bonus points, who ordered the purchase, and from whom?"

"Thomas Jefferson, from the French," Marvin said.

"I forgot that," Lindsay whispered to Megan.

"I couldn't ring in fast enough," Megan said. "But don't worry—I'll be ready for the next question."

"What group of volcanic islands is located in the South Pacific Ocean, approximately halfway between Sydney, Australia, and Hawaii?" Alison asked.

Nobody moved for a few seconds. Then the team that hadn't scored any points rang in. "Um, like, the Philippines?" a girl asked.

"I'm sorry, no. Anyone else?" Alison prompted. "You have three seconds."

Megan searched her brain but couldn't think of the answer. She looked at Brian for help. He'd done a lot of traveling—didn't he know the answer?

At the last second, the team of brains sounded the bell. "Samoa," Marvin said.

"Correct, for another twenty-five points," Alison said. Her assistant marked the score on a clipboard.

"We have to get the next one," Megan whispered. "If we don't, the Brain Trust over there might win!"

"This will be the final question, to determine who will represent Bayside in the *Smarts and Strength* high school competition," Alison said dramatically.

Behind her, Principal Belding sat on the edge of his seat. He looked really nervous, as if *nobody* might make it onto the show.

Next to him in the bleachers, Samuel "Screech" Powers was fiddling with his tie. Screech had graduated from Bayside a few years ago and was now Mr. Belding's assistant. He was the nicest guy in the whole school—and the clumsiest. Screech was dressed in a blazer and khaki pants, but his tie was patterned with Goofy, and he wore purple high-tops on his feet.

This is it, Megan thought as she watched Alison shuffle the cards and pull one out. It all comes down to this question, and we've got to get it!

Alison cleared her throat. "What is the name of the scientific process that describes a fluid seeping through a semipermeable membrane?"

Megan slammed her palm down on the bell.

"Yes?" Alison asked.

"Osmosis!" Megan said triumphantly.

"Correct!" Alison said. "And now, if you'll give us a moment to check our tabulations, we'll announce the winner."

"Cross your fingers," Lindsay said. She was holding on to Tommy's sleeve.

"We have to get on the show, we just have to!" Rachel said desperately.

"We kind of fell apart at the end there," Bobby said. "I kept waiting for a question about the sixty-nine Mets."

"All right, everyone," Alison said. "First, I'd like to thank you for trying out today—you all put out a great effort. And the winner is team number six!"

"That's us!" Lindsay cried.

"I'm going to meet Skip Simon!" Rachel squealed.

"We'll be on TV!" Bobby added with a grin.

"I wonder if this gets televised in Switzerland," Brian said thoughtfully.

The gang was still jumping around when Alison

approached. "Nice job," she said, shaking their hands. "That's the kind of enthusiasm we want to see when you're on the show."

"When is the first show?" Megan asked.

Alison scanned the clipboard in her hand. "Your first match will be next Monday," she said.

"We'll be ready," Megan told her. "Ready to win!" They might have to study all weekend, but they'd be there, armed with the answers.

"Great," Alison said, moving away. "I'll see you then!"

"Thanks!" Megan said.

"Oh my gosh," Rachel exclaimed, her eyes suddenly wide. "Now what am I going to wear? I've already wasted a great outfit on this tryout."

Megan and Lindsay shook their heads.

"Congratulations, team!" Mr. Belding said as they neared the door. His face was flushed with excitement, and he was grinning from ear to ear. "I guess you'll need a team name now that you're going to be on TV. How about—I've got it! Team Bayside!"

"How about Gang of Six?" Screech suggested, his voice squeaking. "Or Bayside's Best?"

Mr. Belding shot Screech a slightly hurt look. "What's wrong with Team Bayside?" he asked.

"Nothing, really," Brian said. "It's just—"

"I want to have a meeting in my office in five minutes," Mr. Belding said, cutting Brian off. His eyes were lit up again. "Screech, you'll take notes."

"Yes sir!" Screech followed Mr. Belding out of the gym.

"We did it, you guys!" Lindsay cheered.

"Was there ever any doubt?" Megan asked.

"We can do anything if we work together." Brian smiled at Rachel. "The closer together, the better."

o o o

Five minutes later, Mr. Belding was pacing back and forth in his office. "I'm sure you're all aware that whenever a Bayside student gets any kind of publicity, it reflects on the school," he told the gang. "And that's why I know you'll agree that I should *personally* make sure you're ready for your appearance on *Smarts and Strength* next week."

"We're already ready, Mr. B.," Tommy said. "I could do that obstacle course with my eyes closed."

"I'm sure you could, Tommy," Mr. Belding replied. "But I noticed that you were a little shaky in other areas. That's why I've decided to be your personal coach—all the way to the finals."

"Gee. Thanks, Mr. Belding," Megan said. She tried to sound as if she thought it was a good idea. It couldn't hurt to have a coach—but Mr. Belding?

"I'll be there for you night and day, day and night," Mr. Belding continued, waving his arms in the air. "I'll lecture, I'll quiz, I'll time your laps around the gym—"

"Excuse me, Mr. Belding, but they only have four days. And three of those four days you'll be at the education conference in Arizona," Screech pointed out.

Mr. Belding groaned. "I see I'll have to miss your first match. But I'll coach you for the rest of them."

"Get the feeling he wants to be on TV as much as we do?" Brian whispered to Megan.

Screech shook his head. "Sorry, sir, but after the conference in Arizona, you have to prepare a speech to give to the school board on what you learn there, and the week after *that*, you're going to a statewide principals' meeting and then—"

"Okay, okay. I get the picture," Mr. Belding looked defeated. "I just hate the idea of you kids going out there all alone to represent Bayside's hopes and dreams."

Screech cleared his throat. Then he coughed. He got up from his chair, started whistling, and stood in front of Mr. Belding. He dodged as Mr. Belding tried to walk around him. Then he cleared his throat a second time, ending with a high-pitched wail.

"Hey! I've got an idea," Mr. Belding said. "Screech, you've won dozens of these types of contests. Why don't *you* coach this team?"

"Me?" Screech acted surprised. "Why, the idea never crossed my mind." He straightened up and put on a serious face. "I'd be honored to."

"It's settled, then," Mr. Belding said. "Team Bayside officially has a coach. Screech, we're counting on you!" Mr. Belding clapped Screech on the back, practically knocking him to the ground.

"Great," Brian said sarcastically. "Now if you'll excuse us, it's time for a little team meeting . . . in private," he added when Screech started to follow.

"Okay, team! Check with me tomorrow for our practice schedule," Screech crowed. "We've got a tough road ahead, but together we can handle it!"

"Yeah, thanks, Screech," Tommy said. "We'll see you tomorrow."

"And remember—if you win, you'll be superstars!" Screech said. "And when you get rich and famous, don't forget who helped you!" he called after the group as they tramped out of Mr. Belding's office.

"Look, I like Screech," Brian said once they were out in the hallway. "He's a nice guy. But he's *also* the most uncoordinated person I've ever met in my entire life—and I've lived in two countries and visited ten more!"

"He might be a little shaky on the athletic events," Lindsay said, nodding.

"A little shaky?" Bobby scoffed. "If Screech were in the Olympics, they'd have to come up with a new kind of medal—the Scrap Medal."

Everyone cracked up. It was true. Screech was as clumsy as he was nice.

"But we don't need that much help with the athletic stuff," Megan said.

"Right," Lindsay agreed. "And Screech has won tons of those brain contests. Not to mention that he had the highest grade point average ever recorded at Bayside. He's practically a walking encyclopedia."

"Really?" Tommy asked, impressed.

"If he's *that* smart, we're practically on our way to San Francisco," Bobby said.

"All expenses paid," Brian added.

"I wonder if Skip Simon will come with us," Rachel said with a little sigh.

Everyone groaned as they walked toward their lockers.

"Wouldn't that be fantastic?" Rachel went on, oblivious to the fact that her friends were halfway down the hall. "Guys? Hey, guys . . ."

chapter

4

On Friday afternoon, Team Bayside met in an empty classroom for their first practice session with Screech. But he was already ten minutes late, and Megan was getting a little annoyed. They needed every minute of practice they could get.

"Maybe Brian knows a lot about European history," Megan murmured.

"You think they'll ask about European history?" Bobby asked nervously. "I don't even know that much about what happened in *this* country."

"I don't even know what happened in *this* state," Rachel said, looking up. She was carefully filing her nails with an emery board.

"I heard Valley has a great team," Bobby said. Valley was Bayside's arch rival, and the two schools were always competing for something.

There was a clanging sound by the doorway, and everyone turned to see Screech coming into the room. He wore a Bayside sweat suit and carried a stack of encyclopedias so high that he could barely see over the top of them. "Greetings, Team Bayside!" he called out. His voice was muffled by the books.

"Let me help you with that," Brian offered, jumping to his feet.

"No need," Screech replied as he weaved his way over to the teacher's desk. "I've got everything under control." He bumped into the desk and lowered the pile of books onto its surface. But the top one slipped off—and fell right onto Lindsay's foot.

"Ow!" Lindsay cried. "Ow ow ow!"

"What happened?" Screech asked. He dumped the rest of the encyclopedias onto the desktop.

"You dropped that huge encyclopedia on her foot!" Tommy said.

"Didn't you wear your steel-toe work boots to school?" Bobby asked. He lifted a tan boot into the air. "You can never be too careful."

"This isn't funny," Tommy said, putting an arm around his girlfriend.

"We should take her to the nurse," Megan added.

Screech looked mortified. "I'm sorry, Lindsay," he said. He took a step toward her, but his sneaker caught in a rope that was hanging from his shoulder and he stumbled. "Here, let me help!" he said. He

tried to untangle the rope from his foot but only got more tangled up.

"No!" Lindsay cried. "I mean, Tommy can take me." She didn't want to hurt Screech's feelings, even if he *did* just break her toe.

"Well, come back and tell us if you're okay," Screech said. "And if you need to go to the hospital for X rays, I'll drive you. And if you want some candy or magazines while you're there, I can pick those up and bring them over to you and—"

"Screech, I'd like to get her to the nurse's office before her foot swells up like a balloon," Tommy said. He picked up Lindsay and carried her out the door.

"I feel terrible!" Screech wailed. "It was an accident!"

"Of course it was, Screech," Brian said. "I'm sure Lindsay will be fine."

"Right," Screech said. He blew his nose and cleared his throat. "Now, I noticed something during the competition yesterday: you guys are a teensy-weensy bit weak on your history and geography facts. And you don't want to lose over something silly like the Boston Tea Party or the Baltic states."

"It's not our fault we haven't had our intensive history seminar yet," Bobby complained.

"Smarts and Strength doesn't care what you've had in school," Screech said darkly. "They only care

if you know the answer. So I've designed a class just for you: Screech's Timetable of the Universe. And for geography, there's Screech's Stop the World Game." He picked up a globe from a nearby shelf and brought it up to the desk. "I'll spin the globe, and when it stops, you guys tell me where my finger is." He spun the globe, making it go faster and faster. Then he put his finger on it—and knocked the globe onto the floor. "Whoops!" The globe half bounced, half rolled across the floor.

"So much for learning our countries," Megan muttered. Maybe having Screech for a coach wasn't such a hot idea after all.

"Well, there's always the famous geography song," Screech said.

"You mean, 'We Are the World'?" Bobby asked.

"No, not *that*." He hummed a few notes of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." "Is everyone ready?"

"Ready for what?" Rachel asked.

"Boston, Massachusetts; Concord, New Hampshire; Providence, Rhode Is—land," Screech sang, pointing to a wall map of the fifty states.

"I hope we don't have to sing our answers," Bobby whispered to Brian as Screech warbled his way through New England.

"How am I supposed to learn all the states and capitals by Monday?" Brian replied. "I just got to this country."

"You'd better handle the *world* geography questions," Megan told him. "Europe, Asia, Africa—"

"Pay close attention," Screech sang, "because after this you're going to sing it with me." He finished off the verse, then held his hands up like a chorus director. "All together now: Bismarck, North Dakota; Denver, Colorado; Cheyenne, Wyoming." Screech's voice cracked on the "Wy" in "Wyoming."

Megan sighed and leaned back in her seat. If Screech was going to sing his way through history, too, they were in for a *long* afternoon.

o o o

Brian couldn't get used to going to work on Saturday afternoon. He was usually hanging out with his friends at the mall or the Max. But here he was, standing behind the counter dressed in a polyester shirt with a little chicken on the pocket and a hat with a floppy beak.

Might as well start reaping the benefits, he thought. He dumped a basket of Super Spicy Spuds into the bin to be salted and peppered. "Special ingredient," he muttered to himself. "Yeah, right." He scooped some fries into a bag and started to munch.

"Are you Brian?" a girl with long blond hair asked. She was dressed in the Pickin' Chicken uniform, too.

"Yup," Brian said.

"I'm Wendy. How's it going?" She smiled and adjusted her cap. "I hate this hat. I can't believe my dad makes us wear them."

"Your dad?"

"Yeah. Mr. Hansen. He's the owner—"

"Your dad's the owner? Wow," Brian said. He'd have to watch himself around her—he didn't want anything getting back to his boss.

"I must have told him about a hundred times, 'Dad, *nobody* wants to wear a hat with a bird on it.' I just hope nobody I know from school comes by, or I'm going to die of humiliation. I usually dress a lot better than this. Hey," she went on, "do you go to Valley, too? I don't remember seeing you around."

"I go to Bayside," Brian explained.

"I guess we're not supposed to get along, then," Wendy said with a giggle. "I mean, Bayside and Valley are huge rivals. But I don't really care about any of that stuff. Like I said, I just hope nobody from Valley comes by today, or I will just be totally, completely embarrassed. I told my dad to change the hat, or I wouldn't work here. But I have to work, anyway." She sighed heavily and rolled her eyes, as if this were totally unfair.

Just then a customer came in, and Brian stepped up to the register to take her order. Wendy was supposed to get the food while he rang it up. But she had pulled out a tiny pocket mirror and was adjust-

ing her cap some more. So Brian made the change and filled the order himself.

Once the customer was gone, Wendy put the mirror away and turned back to Brian. "Fifteen hours a week. How does he expect me to find that much time to work here? I mean, really. I'm only doing this because I ran up a huge phone bill talking to some friends I met at camp last summer in Maine," Wendy said. She rolled up the sleeves of her uniform shirt. "So it was my dad's brilliant idea that I work here in order to pay for it. One thing you have to know about my dad: He gets mad really fast, like in about two seconds. So right after he opened the phone bill, he was, like, 'Wendy, you're going to pay this off and you're going to start now.'"

"I know about huge phone bills," Brian said. "I had one right after I moved here from Switzerland, but my parents—"

"You're from Switzerland? You are seriously from Switzerland?" Wendy said excitedly. "I thought you had some kind of weird accent, but I wasn't sure."

Probably because she's been talking nonstop since she got here, Brian thought. "Well, yeah," he said. "I'm from Switzerland."

"Cool!" Wendy exclaimed. "You know, the summer before last—the summer before I went to Maine—we went to France. I mean, I know it's not Switzerland,

but anyway, I just loved it over there. I can't wait to go back. Of course it would have been much more fun if I weren't with my parents and my dopey little brother. He insisted on going to every single fast-food restaurant in France instead of letting us eat real food. But of course my dad loved that because he kept saying he wanted to open some franchise or something in, like, Paris. 'I'm sure, Dad,' I kept saying. 'I'm sure you're going to open a Pickin' Chicken right by the Eiffel Tower.'"

Brian laughed. The idea of this restaurant being transplanted to France was pretty funny. *I can see how she got such an expensive phone bill, too,* he thought. She hadn't stopped talking yet. "Oops—customers," he said, hurrying to the register.

"One chicken sandwich combo, two Super Spicy Spuds, an orange soda, and a large Burger Supreme," a woman said. "To go."

Brian rang everything up and turned to Wendy, expecting her to be getting the order ready to go. "After Paris we went to see all those huge mansions—what are they called?" she asked him. "Chateaus. Yeah. Anyway—"

"Wendy, I think we need some more Spuds," Brian said. He scooped the last of the thick fries into a bag for the customer.

"How do you make these again?" Wendy asked.

Brian opened the freezer and pointed to a huge

stack of bags. "Open one of those and dump the potatoes in the fryer and put the basket down. When the timer beeps, put the fries in the bin, salt and pepper 'em, and fill the bags." He hurried back to the register, where new customers were waiting.

As he was taking orders, Brian glanced over his shoulder to see how Wendy was doing. She sure was taking her time getting the potato bag open.

"It's funny, isn't it, how these are called french fries," Wendy babbled. "I mean, everywhere except here because my dad came up with a different name for them—but then in France, they're something else and somebody told me they weren't even really from France originally." Wendy leisurely dumped the frozen fries into the basket and dropped it into the hot oil as Brian scrambled around getting sandwiches and drinks.

"Just a few minutes, folks, on the Super Spicy Spuds," Brian told the waiting customers. "If you'd like to sit down, I'll bring them to you."

"Mine are to go," one woman complained.

"Right. Well, we like to make them fresh for you," Brian said. He flashed her his most charming smile.

"Fresh is fine, but I don't have all day," the woman snapped.

This is going to be a lot harder than I thought, Brian told himself. Especially with a chatterbox for a co-worker. He rang up another order as a group of kids from Bayside came in. *But my new bike will be worth it.*

"Nice hat, Keller!" one of them shouted. And somebody else started clucking at him.

At least I hope it will.

o o o

"Is it even?" Megan asked. It was Monday morning, and she and Bobby were holding up a banner inside the school's front doors. SUPPORT TEAM BAYSIDE—WATCH SMARTS AND STRENGTH TODAY! STUDIO TICKETS STILL AVAILABLE! it announced.

Lindsay limped down the steps to get a better look. "A little higher on the right. No, that's too much. A little lower. There!"

The gang had made the banner the night before, after a three-hour study session with Screech in Lindsay's living room. Since she still couldn't walk very well, everyone had come to her house.

"Are you sure we want everyone to watch?" Bobby said. "I'd hate for everyone to watch us lose."

"We'll never win with an attitude like that," Megan scolded as the threesome headed down the hall.

"Sorry. I guess I'm just a little nervous about being watched by thousands of people," Bobby said.

Lindsay leaned against the wall. "Megan's right. We have to be confident."

"Does your foot still hurt?" Bobby asked.

Lindsay nodded. "It's about twelve different shades of purple and blue. But at least nothing's

broken." She'd been icing and soaking her foot so much that she'd hardly had time to do anything else all weekend.

Just then, Dave Williams came around the corner. "Excuse me," he said, giving Megan an angry look.

"Gladly," Megan said, stepping aside so he could get to his locker.

Lindsay's mouth dropped open. What was going on between Megan and Dave?

Lindsay hobbled over to Megan's side. "What's going on with Dave?" she whispered. "Did you guys have a fight?"

Megan nodded. "We sort of broke up, too," she said flatly.

"Oh, Megan," Lindsay said, putting a hand on her friend's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"To tell you the truth, I don't really care," Megan said. She slammed her locker door shut. "I just want to win that trip to San Francisco—to show everyone that we're the best."

Lindsay frowned. She knew that Megan liked Dave a lot. Their fight must be upsetting her, even if she didn't want to admit it. Maybe that was why she was so focused on the competition—so she wouldn't have to think about Dave. *I'm glad I'm not in Megan's shoes*, Lindsay thought as she headed to homeroom. *Except that if I were, I wouldn't be limping!*

"This is hardly what I expected," Megan said. She looked around the KBAY studio backstage dressing room, where they'd been told to wait before their first show. Racks of clothes and costumes were shoved up against the walls. A cracked mirror hung in front of a tiny dressing table. And a wooden bench, right by the door, was the only place to sit.

"Yeah. You'd think they'd at least have hair and makeup stylists back here for us," Rachel said. She was busily applying a fresh coat of ruby red lipstick.

"I still think it's exciting," Lindsay said. "And while we're here, you might want to think about changing your clothes, Rachel," she added. She gestured to a rack of pants.

"Why? Don't I look okay?" Rachel stood back from the mirror a few feet and turned right, then left.

"You look fantastic," Brian said, gazing admiringly at her. "The only problem is, you're not going to be able to do any of the athletic events."

Bobby nodded as he paced back and forth. "Unless they add something involving crawling."

Rachel looked down at her long, tight-fitting red skirt. She was wearing a red-and-black patterned oversize blouse, and on her feet, red pumps with short heels. Everyone else had on T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers.

"Oh, Skip's not going to make me run the obstacle course," Rachel said, laughing. "He'll take one look at me and . . . well, he'll just know that I should do something more . . . delicate. Besides, what are the chances of me getting picked?"

"Well, I'm no math genius, but one in six, I think," Tommy said.

"I'm not worried," Rachel said. She leaned closer to the mirror and touched up her mascara.

Well, *we are worried!* Megan wanted to say. Did Rachel think she was the only person on their team?

There was a knock on the door. "Everyone decent?" a deep male voice asked.

"Oh my gosh," Rachel blushed. "It's *him*."

"Come in!" Megan said.

Skip Simon stepped through the doorway, wearing his usual black tuxedo jacket and sweatpants. Up close, Megan could see that he had makeup on

and that his black hair was styled with a thick layer of gel.

"Howdy, everyone. Welcome to *Smarts and Strength*. Have you had time to review all the rules? We're so, so happy to have you here." He sounded like a prerecorded message on an answering machine.

"My name's Megan Jones," Megan said, stepping forward. "I'm the team's captain, and these are my friends Bobby, Brian, Lindsay, Tommy, and—"

"Rachel." Rachel sidled up to Skip and smiled at him. "It is *such* an honor to meet you, Mr. Simon."

"Call me Skip," he said with a shrug.

"Really? Skip?" Rachel looked as if she might faint. "You know, I'm a huge fan of yours. I just adore the way you ask those questions every weekday afternoon. It's so exciting to meet you."

"It's wonderful to meet you, too," Skip replied in a phony-sounding voice. "So you guys will need to be onstage in five minutes. And remember to run out jumping and cheering."

"No problem," Tommy told him. "We are one hundred percent pumped."

"Fantabulous," Skip said. "Well, good luck!" He smiled and ducked out of the room.

Rachel leaned against the wall and sighed. "What a hunk," she murmured.

"You guys psyched and ready to go?" Megan asked, ignoring Rachel's comment.

"You bet," Brian said.

"Totally." Tommy nodded.

"I'm so excited we're going to be on TV!" Lindsay said.

"Excited isn't exactly the word I would use." Bobby fiddled with the doorknob nervously. His hands were shaking.

As they headed out to the stage, Rachel pictured herself ringing the buzzer. Skip would turn to her with that gorgeous smile. She'd answer a question about NASA's space program. Then one about the climate in Greenland. And then, amazing everyone, she'd come up with an answer about an obscure part of French history. The scoreboard behind Skip would flash wildly. "Rachel, you've won all the points for your team!" Skip would cry. He'd put his arms around her waist and swing her around. "You're so brilliant *and so beau*—"

"Rachel, I need you to help Bobby!" Megan said, interrupting Rachel's daydream. "I think he's got stage fright!"

Rachel snapped back to reality and saw Bobby standing on the side of the stage, his knees knocking together. She hurried over to him. "It's okay, Bobby," she said, taking his arm.

"I—I can't do it," he whispered frantically. "I even failed public speaking!"

"Just pretend that no one else is here," Rachel said. She slowly led him over to their section of the

stage. "And if that doesn't work, picture everyone in their underwear!"

o o o

"And now, Team Shorewood Hills, a question for you." Skip Simon turned to them and smiled.

Lindsay glanced at the scoreboard dangling above Skip's head. Bayside 110, Shorewood Hills 100. They were winning, but not by much.

"When discussing computer technology, what does the term CD-ROM stand for?" Skip asked.

Everyone on the team looked at each other.

"Three seconds," Skip said.

"Compact disc, random . . . random . . . order . . ." The buzzer went off, indicating they were out of time.

"Incorrect!" Skip said. "Team Bayside, would you like to give it a shot?"

"Compact Disc Read-Only Memory," Megan replied calmly.

"Excellent! Twenty points for Bayside!" Skip announced.

Half the small studio audience cheered. The other half, rooting for Shorewood Hills, booed. Screech jumped to his feet and shouted "Bravo, Bayside!"

"Back to you, Bayside. What sport has its hall of fame in Springfield, Massachu—"

"Basketball," Bobby answered without missing a beat.
 "That is correct! Add another twenty," Skip instructed the scorekeeper.

"Way to go, Bobby," Lindsay whispered. She was glad he'd recovered from his nervousness.

"Now, Shorewood, for your final academic question before our next sporting event. Name the French term that means to know how to act."

"Capiche," a girl answered.

"No, that's Italian. Bayside?"

Brian smiled as everyone on the Bayside team turned to him. "*Savoir faire*," he said.

"Another twenty points!" Skip crowed. "We'll pause for a station break and return with more athletic events. Will today's teams prove that they're as strong as they think?" Skip flashed his winning smile at the camera, then winked. "Stay tuned!"

The Bayside students in the audience roared as the show went to a commercial break.

"All right!" Megan clapped. "We're winning!"

"We're *totally* winning," Brian said. "I can't believe how easy this is."

"I can't believe he's not coming over to talk to us," Rachel complained, gazing at Skip. He was getting his hair and makeup touched up by a stylist.

"Rachel, he's supposed to be impartial," Lindsay said.

"He can't give special treatment to one of the teams."

"He seems pretty phony, anyway," Brian added.

"He says the same things over and over with his little winks and smiles. And he uses cue cards—even though he says the same things every day!"

Rachel looked at Brian as if he'd just said that Mother Teresa was a phony. "Brian, how can you—"

"And we're back with the first match in our area high school competition!" Skip said as the audience broke into applause. "Pay close attention, folks, because this one's going down to the wire."

"Not," Megan said under her breath.

"We've worked our way up to the most exciting event of the afternoon: the rope climb! Our contestants will run a short sprint across the stage, climb up over a six-foot wall—with the help of a rope—then run a few more yards to the finish line. Now, let's see who our lucky contestants will be!" Skip reached into a box on the podium labeled SHOREWOOD and pulled out a name. "For Shorewood Hills, Kurt Thompson!" he exclaimed. As Shorewood fans cheered, Kurt ran over to the starting line.

Then Skip rummaged in the box labeled BAYSIDE. Lindsay was glad she'd already been picked for an athletic event because it meant that her name was no longer in the hat. She crossed her fingers, hoping Rachel's name wouldn't be picked. There was no way she could climb a wall in that outfit.

"For Bayside, Tommy DeLuca!" Skip announced.

"All right!" Brian cheered. Everyone gave Tommy

a high five before he ran over to the starting line.

A minute later, the two contestants were in a crouched position. "On your mark," Skip said, raising his hand over his head. "Get set . . . GO!"

Tommy and Kurt were neck and neck as they raced to the wall. Grabbing the rope, Tommy pulled himself up. He used his feet to push against the wall and lifted one hand above the other. Gasping, he reached the top and dropped down to the other side. When he reached the finish line, Kurt was still struggling to get over the top of the wall.

"Twenty more points!" Skip called as Team Bayside jumped up and down. They were on their way!

o o o

"Hey, Megan—was it as fun as it looked?" someone called as she walked into biology class.

"You were awesome," Marvin Melvin agreed, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Thanks, you guys," Megan said, beaming. It felt great to get all this attention. But where was the one person she really wanted the attention from?

She dug into her bag and pulled out a notebook. When she looked up, her heart skipped a beat. Dave was walking down the aisle she was sitting in. What was he going to say to her?

But a second later, Dave walked right by without saying a word.

So much for recognition, Megan thought. She wished they weren't giving each other the silent treatment. She missed Dave. But if he was going to ignore her, she could ignore him, too.

Turning to the front of the classroom, she opened her notebook as Mr. Matthews started his lecture. Only she couldn't concentrate on what he was saying—it went in one ear and out the other. So she started jotting down things she wanted the team to go over before their next match. Her first priority was getting Rachel's head out of the clouds so she could help the team. And then there was Bobby's stage fright. She didn't want that cropping up again.

"Megan?" Mr. Matthews said. "I'm afraid you didn't hear me the first time. What are the major functions of fat in the body?"

Megan looked up at the teacher, her mind a complete blank.

"Well, I see you're too worn out from your new career in entertainment to pay attention in class," Mr. Matthews said. "And I'd like to remind you that here your answers count for more than twenty points. Now, would you come to the board, please?"

Megan got up and walked to the front of the room. When she turned around, she saw Dave smirking at her.

He thinks I can't do everything and do it well, she thought. *But I'll show him.*

chapter

6

"F our eighty, five hundred . . ." Brian counted the stack of twenties in his hand. He'd counted the money three times, and it always came up the same: twenty dollars short.

He put the money down and gazed around the back office. This was only his second time closing the restaurant, and he didn't want anything to go wrong. He needed this job.

So did Wendy. But you'd never know it by the way she lounged around. She hardly lifted a finger to help even when it was incredibly busy. Working with her was almost worse than having to work alone.

Tonight she'd actually stood at the cash register and taken orders—for about ten minutes out of the four hours she was supposed to be working.

Wait a second. Brian got a sudden image in his

head. Wendy was dropping some money on the floor and leaning down to grab it. *Maybe she didn't put it back*, he thought. *Maybe she forgot*. Wendy would never take money from the Pickin' Chicken register. Would she?

He was still pondering the situation when the office door opened and Mr. Hansen walked in. "Hello, Brian. I came by to get the night deposit. Everything turn out all right?"

"Well . . ." Brian looked at the cash sales report, then at the stack of neatly counted and arranged bills. "Uh, yeah," he said, standing up. "But I left something up front. I'll be right back." He grabbed the cash report from the desk and hurried down the hall and into the restaurant.

"Isn't my dad done yet?" Wendy asked. "Because I have to be home and in bed by ten, or else I get these really big circles under my eyes and then, it's like, hello, I just came out of a crypt."

Brian smiled. Wendy had a tendency to make everything seem dramatic. "Listen, the register is twenty dollars short. I was wondering if you found any money while you were cleaning." He didn't want to come right out and suggest that she'd done anything wrong. After all, he didn't really know.

"Uh, no," she said quickly. "And I just mopped the floor. There wasn't anything down there except a bunch of Spicy Spuds and ten million bun crumbs."

"So you didn't see any money?" Brian asked again. "Did one of us maybe drop a twenty-dollar bill or put it in the wrong place or something? I've got to find it or I'm going to be in hot water with your dad."

"I don't remember seeing anything out of the ordinary; I mean, it was so busy," Wendy said evasively. She twirled a lock of hair around her finger.

Tell me about it, Brian thought. "Well, then I guess we're just twenty dollars short and—"

"What? We're twenty dollars short?" Mr. Hansen was walking toward them.

Brian cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, sir. I can't figure it out. But the money here is twenty dollars less than it should be."

"Maybe we rang in too many items, like, something that we didn't really sell," Wendy suggested.

"I doubt that!" Mr. Hansen bellowed. Then his face turned red, as if he were about to blow his stack.

He's going to fire me! Brian thought, panicking. "Sir, I'm not sure what happened, but you can take the money out of my pay."

Mr. Hansen's face relaxed. "Are you sure?"

"Well, there's no way of knowing who made the mistake," Brian said. "And somebody's got to take responsibility." *Twenty dollars now, and I'll get to keep this job. It's a small sacrifice.*

Mr. Hansen slapped Brian on the back. "You're

such an honest, responsible young man," he said. "That's why I've decided to make you my assistant night manager. Effective tomorrow, you'll be making an extra fifty cents an hour."

"Thank you, sir," Brian said. "You won't regret this!" He may have been out twenty bucks, but the result was excellent!

"Congratulations," Wendy said, a big smile plastered on her face.

What is she so happy about? Brian wondered. *She isn't getting anything out of this . . . unless I just put back the twenty dollars she took.* Whatever had happened with the missing money, Brian was going to watch Wendy a little more carefully from now on. He wasn't about to cough up four hours' worth of wages to cover for a co-worker who didn't pull her weight—no matter *who* her father was.

o o o

"Remember, the strategy behind winning is not to get too tense," Screech said.

"I couldn't be more relaxed," Megan said. "We pulverized Shorewood Hills, and now we're going to walk all over Adams High."

"Megan, you sound like you're in an action-hero movie," Lindsay said. "We're not trying to kill the other team."

"Speak for yourself," Tommy said. "I want to win

no matter what. I heard Valley's been winning, and we can't lose before they do." He peeked through the curtains. "Mr. Belding is here. And there's Dave Williams with a bunch of his friends."

Lindsay whacked Tommy, and he looked apologetic. "Oops, sorry," he said to Megan. "I keep forgetting you guys broke up."

"That's okay," Megan said. She was secretly excited that he had come to the taping.

"Mr. Belding said he's taking a personal interest in each and every one of your academic TV sporting careers," Screech explained. Then he wrinkled his forehead in confusion. "Or was it TV sporting academic careers?"

"He just wants to get on TV with us," Megan said. "But who can blame him? It's fun."

"It's a total blast!" Bobby agreed.

Everyone looked at him. After his bout of stage fright earlier that week, they weren't sure whether he was telling the truth.

"I'm totally calm," he said. "Honest."

"Hey, has anyone seen Rachel?" Lindsay asked, checking her watch. "She said she was going to the bathroom, but that was ten minutes ago."

"She's probably touching up her makeup," Brian said. "She could be in there for hours."

"Here I am!" Rachel hurried down the hallway. "I was just changing into my TV outfit."

Everyone groaned, but when Rachel peeled off her red jacket they saw that she was wearing the same white I LEARNED IT ALL AT BAYSIDE T-shirt as everyone else. Mr. Belding had had the T-shirts printed and was selling them all over school. Rachel had red jeans on, too, and a red velvet tie around her ponytail. "Good thing Mr. Belding put that slogan in red writing, or I wouldn't have been able to coordinate this," she said, pulling a wisp of hair back into her ponytail.

"Rachel, they say fantasy is part of life, but how about a *real* date with me this weekend?" Brian asked. "I have Sunday night off, and we could see a movie . . ."

"I don't know," Rachel said. "I might have to go shopping. I'm running out of red outfits, and I'd die before I wore the same thing twice." She took a tube of lipstick out of her pocket and put on yet another coat of what she called Skip Simon Red.

"Rachel, wait a sec. I think you have something—," Bobby began.

"And now, representing Bayside High School, here are Lindsay, Tommy, Rachel, Brian, Bobby, and their team captain, Megan!" the announcer boomed into the microphone.

Megan threw back the curtains and ran onto the stage, her teammates right behind her.

"Welcome back, Adams High. Nice to see you again, Bayside." Skip grinned at both teams.

"Did you hear that?" Rachel whispered into Lindsay's ear. "He said it was nice to see me again."

"Tell us a little about yourselves, teams," Skip said. "Bayside, we'll start with you."

"Well," Megan began, "we—"

"Thanks, it's great to be here!" Rachel interrupted enthusiastically.

"And you're . . ." Skip paused.

"Rachel? Rachel Meyers?" she said, looking offended. They'd just met four days ago!

"Rachel," Lindsay whispered.

"And how did you put your team together?" Skip asked.

"It was easy," Rachel said with a dramatic wave of her hand. "After all, we've been friends forever!"

"That's great!" Skip said. "Thanks, Rachel."

"You're welcome," Rachel said with a loud sigh. "Anything else you want to know about me—us, I mean?"

"Rachel!" Lindsay whispered. She tugged at Rachel's sleeve.

"Adams, what about you? Tell us about yourselves," Skip prompted the other team.

Rachel turned to Lindsay. "What?" she asked, annoyed. "I was talking to Skip."

"Remember how we had spinach salad for lunch?" Lindsay asked.

"Yeah, and?" Rachel asked.

"You have a piece of spinach stuck between your front teeth," Lindsay said.

A look of horror crossed Rachel's face as she clamped a hand tightly over her mouth. "Lindsay, could you do me a big favor?" she asked softly.

"Want some dental floss? I might have some in my purse," Lindsay offered.

Rachel shook her head. "Just kill me now," she said. "I can't live through the humiliation!"

o o o

"And Bayside wins by one hundred and seventy-five points!" Skip shouted as the theme music started up. "You'll be seeing them next week in the semifinals. Good luck, Bayside. And thanks for playing, Adams! Until then, remember, you need to be strong and smart!"

He jogged over to Bayside's long table. "Nice going, guys." He peeled his microphone off his tuxedo jacket. "Think you'll make it to the finals?"

"Definitely," Megan said.

"As long as you're there," Rachel said dreamily. She seemed to have recovered from her humiliating blunder earlier in the show—or maybe she'd just forgotten because Skip was standing in front of her.

Skip turned to Tommy. "Nice job on the balance beam. I wouldn't think a big guy like you could do so well."

"Thanks," Tommy replied.

Rachel edged closer to Skip. She cleared her throat. When Skip didn't look her way, she cleared her throat again, making a loud, pathetic whine.

"Oh, and, uh . . . great job answering the question about uh . . ." Skip faltered.

"How to stop a run in panty hose." Rachel smiled. "I just knew there'd be something in my particular field of knowledge eventually. Not that patching panty hose with clear nail polish is what I'm planning to do with my life. I hope to become a model. Either that or an actress." She tossed her head a little so he could see how shiny her hair was.

"Interesting," Skip muttered. "So, who's this?" He turned to Mr. Belding, who had come onto the stage to congratulate the team.

"This is our principal, Mr. Balding—I mean, Mr. Belding," Bobby said with a nervous laugh. He stepped away as Mr. Belding frowned at him.

"A pleasure, sir," Skip said, shaking his hand.

"Likewise," Mr. Belding beamed, then seemed to glance around for any cameras that might still be on. "How about those T-shirts, gang? Did they bring you luck or what?"

"The T-shirts are great, Mr. B., but luck was only part of it," Megan told him. "The rest was brainpower, athletic prowess, and top-of-the-line coaching."

Screech grinned.

"You've got a great team here," Skip said.

"Thank you, Skip," Rachel crooned. "That really means a lot, coming from you."

"They are a great team," Mr. Belding said. "And they're going to get even better because I've got a plan!"

"Well, good luck with it, and I'll see you next week," Skip said. "Have a fantabulous weekend!" He jogged off toward the backstage area.

"How can I have a great weekend when I won't see him at all?" Rachel moaned.

"Hey, Mr. B., what's this about a plan?" Tommy asked.

"It's going to be great," Mr. Belding smiled at them. "Trust me."

o o o

"Now, you've gotten a lot better with all your academic answers," Mr. Belding said. It was Monday afternoon, and he'd called the team together for a meeting in the gym. "But your athletic events . . . well, I'm afraid you seem to be getting worse."

Everyone swiveled their heads to look at Screech.

"What's everybody looking at me for?" Screech asked, looking a little hurt.

"Because last time we checked, chess was not one of the athletic events on *Smarts and Strength*," Tommy replied.

"We did fine in the athletic events," Megan protested. "We might have lost one or two each game, but that's not very much."

"It might not be much now, but in the semifinals and finals, it could be the difference between winning and losing," Mr. Belding said. "That's why I've decided to bring in some reinforcements. A training specialist. An experienced athlete who—"

"Belding, what do you want?" bellowed Mrs. Steele, one of the girls' gym teachers. She spoke through a bullhorn that was hanging from a strap around her neck. Dressed in baggy gray sweatpants and a large gray sweatshirt, she looked like a military grandma.

"Oh no, it's the human tank," Megan said under her breath. Just last year, the gang had pulled every scheme they could think of to keep Mrs. Steele from chaperoning a camping trip.

"Mrs. Steele, thank you for coming. Remember the special assignment I told you about at lunch? Well, here they are—Bayside's favorite contestants."

Mrs. Steele looked each of them up and down. "Are you telling me the hopes of Bayside are resting on these *wimpy* shoulders?"

Tommy took a step toward her. "Who are you calling wimpy?" he asked, giving her a steely stare.

"Tommy . . . Mrs. Steele . . . calm down," Mr. Belding said nervously. "I just thought that since

Mrs. Steele is Bayside's top fitness trainer, she might be able to help out. I'm sure she doesn't think any of you are wimpy. Do you, Mrs. Steele?" he said in a stern, take-charge voice.

"No. But you, Belding, are looking a little flabby under the arms there." She squeezed his biceps.

"Just get going on the team!" he said as he weaseled out of her grasp.

"Prepare to die," Megan whispered to Rachel.

"All right, kids, get to your feet. We'll start with some calisthenics. Ready and—" Mrs. Steele launched into a jumping jack. "Everything in sets of a hundred. Jumping jacks, sit-ups, toe touches . . ."

"I can't do *ten* sit-ups," Rachel panted.

"No talking while exercising!" Mrs. Steele shouted through the bullhorn. "Drop and give me fifty."

"Fifty what?" Rachel asked, her eyes wide.

"Push-ups, young lady," Mrs. Steele said.

"But I can't even do five push-ups," Rachel complained.

Mrs. Steele looked horrified. "We'll see about that! By the end of today, you're going to be in A1 shape!"

"In one day? Hasn't she heard of overexercising?" Lindsay grumbled.

"Mrs. Steele hasn't even heard that sweats come in colors besides *gray*," Megan said.

"Screech might have been uncoordinated, but at least he was human," Bobby said as he tried to

catch his breath. Next they launched into their hundred toe touches.

Tommy wiped the sweat off his forehead with his T-shirt sleeve. "I don't think Coach ever made us practice this hard."

"Follow me!" Mrs. Steele shouted into the bullhorn. "Enough standing around and chatting! Keep that up and you'll be going home without a trophy, without a medal, without any pride and dignity."

"Well, if you're going to put it that way." Brian started jogging around the gym, following Mrs. Steele's lead.

"Sure, make the rest of us look bad," Bobby grumbled as he ran after them.

"Six laps, and then we move into the weight room! Hurry, people, we don't have all day!" Mrs. Steele yelled.

"Thank goodness," Megan grumbled. "She'd have us exercising twenty-four hours in a row!"

7

"Last question, Bayside. Answer this correctly and you win. If you miss it and Kennedy answers correctly, it'll be a tie and we'll go into our super special bonus tiebreaker round," Skip said dramatically.

Lindsay crossed her fingers. Everyone on the Bayside team leaned forward, anticipating the question. Beside her, Bobby was drumming his fingers against the table. Megan let out a deep breath. And she could see Screech in the front row, practically falling off the edge of his seat.

"Name the biological process by which a single cell divides into two identical cells," Skip said.

Everyone on the team looked at each other. Megan nodded.

"Megan?" Skip asked. "For a chance to play in the finals this Friday . . . a chance to win an all-

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expenses-paid weekend trip to San Francisco . . . what is the answer?"

"Skip, that biological process would be mitosis," Megan said with a grin.

"You are correct!" Skip cried. "Bayside is going to the finals!"

The Bayside students in the audience roared their applause as the theme music started up.

"All right!" Bobby cried.

"We did it!" Rachel shouted.

"Was there ever any doubt?" Megan asked with a shrug. Then she started laughing, and the whole group gathered in a circle for a hug.

"Excuse me—Megan Jones?"

Megan turned around and saw a man wearing a suit smiling at her. He carried a notebook.

"Hi. My name's Bob Raffella," the man said. He held out his hand. "I'm a reporter, and I'd like to do a story on your team."

"Cool," Megan said, nodding. Over the reporter's shoulder, she saw a huge group of Bayside students celebrating their win—including Dave. Only he wasn't cheering like everyone else. He was watching her.

"Just answer a few questions, if that's okay. I assume since you're the team captain, you're the right person to talk to?" Mr. Raffella asked her.

"Oh, definitely," Megan said, glancing at Dave.

"Great. I'd like to do a profile on the teams in the

May the Best Team Win

finals. So tell me. Whose idea was it to appear on the show?"

"Mine, actually," Megan said.

Lindsay raised an eyebrow. As far as she could remember, it had been her idea. Megan hadn't even heard of *Smarts and Strength* until Lindsay told her to watch it a couple of weeks ago.

"I've got this terrific group of friends, we're all smart, and I just thought, well, why not? What do we have to lose?" Megan continued.

"You do seem to be a tight group here," Mr. Raffella said. "Have you been friends for long?"

"Pretty much," Megan said. "Brian just moved here, but the rest of us have known each other practically forever."

"Tell me about your strategy," Mr. Raffella said.

"Well, I guess our strategy is for each of us to rely on our strengths. For instance, mine is . . . well, almost anything, really." Megan smiled as the photographer accompanying the reporter took her picture. She hoped Dave was still watching.

"Is that why you're the team captain?" Mr. Raffella asked.

"Well, kind of," Megan said. "I guess it's because I'm a natural leader."

"She's the team captain because she appointed herself that day in the gym," Lindsay whispered to Tommy. "Remember?"

"It wasn't any big decision, that's for sure," Tommy agreed.

"And I think that as team captain, I have a lot of influence over what happens with the team," Megan went on. "I like to think that I'm the driving force behind our victories. I kind of get everyone pumped up for each match, give a lot of positive reinforcement, and stuff like that."

"She's getting a little carried away, don't you think?" Bobby whispered to the rest of the gang.

Everyone nodded—except Rachel. She was following Skip Simon backstage. "Thanks for everything," she said. "I can't wait for Friday."

"Yeah, well, good luck," Skip said. He sounded a little uneasy.

"Do you think if we win that maybe we could all go out somewhere and celebrate . . . together?" Rachel asked.

"Oh, sure, sure thing. Sounds great. Gotta run!" He winked at Rachel, then jogged backstage.

"Is that a wink or a twitch?" Tommy said. "He does that about fifty times on every show."

"Did you *hear* that?" Rachel squealed, coming over to her friends. "We have a date!"

"Not exactly," Lindsay said.

"Well, practically," Rachel said. "And did you see the way he winked at me just now?"

"He winks at the audience twenty times a day,"

Brian pointed out. "Is that what you mean?"

"He was looking at *me* this time," Rachel said. She put a hand up to her forehead. "I feel faint!"

o o o

"And I was supposed to have two chicken chunk orders, and two large Spuds—not one burger and a small onion rings!"

"I'm sorry, sir," Brian smiled sheepishly. "We're a little understaffed tonight. I'll get the right order for you." He hurried to the warmer, grabbed the bags of chicken and Spuds, and stuffed them into a bag.

"Could we have some napkins, please?"

"You're all out of ketchup, too."

"Hey buddy—I'd like my coffee *today*."

While Brian took the next customer's order, he grabbed a package of napkins, ripped off the brown wrapper, and tossed them onto the counter. Then he took the box of ketchup packets from a shelf and placed it on the counter, too.

"A little understaffed," he muttered as he poured a cup of coffee from the pot he'd just made. He handed it to another angry customer, then put together the next order. Wendy was over an hour late. He'd been tempted to call Mr. Hansen and ask him where she was. But he didn't want to get her in trouble.

"Wendy, you were supposed to be here over an

hour ago!" Brian said when she finally walked through the door. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to handle the six o'clock dinner rush all alone?"

"I didn't realize it was so late," Wendy said nonchalantly.

"That's it?" Brian said.

"Well, I . . ."

"You forgot you have to be at work at a certain time?"

"I'm sorry! Something came up! Something horrible and terrible and—" Wendy's lip started trembling. Before Brian could tell her it was all right, she burst into tears.

"It's okay. You're here now," Brian said. He was feeling a little guilty for coming down on her so hard. He handed her a napkin. "What's wrong?"

Wendy sniffled. "Just the worst thing that can possibly happen. You know I told you how I had all these friends I met at camp in Maine, right? Well, there was this guy I was kind of involved with. And now that I've been making some money, I thought it would be okay for me to call him, so I did, and"—she sniffled again—"he told me he's got a new girlfriend."

"Sorry," Brian said, patting her arm comfortingly. "That's a terrible thing to hear over the phone." He was really feeling guilty now.

"I'll get over it, I guess," Wendy sobbed. She

wiped her tears with a napkin and heaved a big sigh. "I can help now. Just let me punch in."

Brian followed her into the kitchen to get some potatoes for the Spicy Spuds. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her fiddle with the clock.

What is she doing? he wondered as he headed back into the kitchen. When he passed the time clock, he did a double take. Wendy had changed the hands on the clock so it looked like she'd punched in on time! Brian didn't think a time clock could be changed. But Wendy had managed it somehow.

I guess it helps to be the boss's daughter, he thought as he dumped the frozen potatoes into the pool of simmering oil. I wonder if she made up that story about her ex-boyfriend, too. . . .

o o o

"What's it called?" Lindsay asked as she sat down in a comfortable chair in Mr. Belding's office.

"The Greatest Triumphs in History," Mr. Belding said. He slid the tape into the VCR. "I thought you guys could use a little motivational help."

"We're feeling pretty motivated already," Megan said.

"Speak for yourself," Brian mumbled. He rested his head on his hands. "I had to work until ten o'clock the past two nights, then do my homework."

And then worry about trying to cram American history for our show tomorrow."

"Only one more day, and Bayside's name will go down in history," Mr. Belding said proudly. He turned up the volume.

Some classical music played, then everyone heard a man's voice. "Some of the greatest triumphs in history almost didn't happen. But with the intelligence and cunning of certain individuals, the course of the modern world was changed forever."

Everyone started shifting in their chairs.

"Bo-ring," Tommy mouthed to Lindsay. She had just poked Brian because he'd started snoring.

"Do you see what I'm talking about? I mean, did the Russians give up when the Germans took over their country? Did they let Moscow fall? No!" Mr. Belding banged his fist on his desk.

"Uh . . . Mr. B., we appreciate what you're trying to do, but that was World War II. We're talking about a little match against Valley," Tommy said.

"The matches have been closer every time," Screech pointed out. "And tomorrow you're competing against Valley. You can't rest on your laurels."

"Laurel isn't even on our team, Screech," Rachel said.

"Screech is right. You relax for one second and—zoom!" Mr. Belding made a cutting motion through the air. "Your opponent shoots past you!"

"Still painful, isn't it, sir?" Screech said sympathetically. He patted the principal on the shoulder. "Mr. Belding lost a close race when he was at Bayside," he explained. "And it cost the entire Bayside track team the state championships."

"Screech!" Mr. Belding protested. "It wasn't all my fault."

"Don't worry, Mr. Belding," Megan said. "We're getting together tonight for a final strategy session."

"We are?" Lindsay asked, surprised.

"I don't know if I can get off work," Brian said.

"I'm calling this meeting as team captain," Megan said sternly. "Everyone needs to be there."

Lindsay was a little annoyed. When did Megan decide to have a meeting? She was definitely getting carried away with this team captain thing. But Lindsay had to admit that a last-minute meeting was a good idea. "I'll be there," she said with a sigh.

"Cheer up, Mr. B.," Screech said. "I'll bet that Valley track star isn't a high school principal."

"No, he isn't," Mr. Belding said. He looked depressed. "He's a United States senator."

o o o

Rachel came running into the Max half an hour after their scheduled meeting was supposed to start that night. "Sorry I'm late," she panted. "Mrs. Steele was holding me hostage."

"I've had enough of this training jazz," Tommy said. "Screech left notes on my locker today with lists of presidents, world leaders, famous inventors . . ."

"He called me at one o'clock in the morning to ask what the capital of Chile was," Bobby said. "My mom had a fit, and I couldn't fall asleep afterward because I was too worried about giving the wrong answer on the show. It's Santiago, by the way."

"That's nothing. Mrs. Steele signed me out of all my classes this afternoon for one-on-one training," Rachel said. "I can barely move."

"Come on, you guys, it's not that bad," Megan said. "Do we want to win or not?"

"I don't think you realize what we've been through," Brian replied, annoyed.

"Yeah," Bobby agreed. "Did Screech wake you up in the middle of the night and ask you to recite the periodic table of the elements—backward?"

"Did you run laps around the track for two hours straight?" Rachel added. "I had to use half a bottle of cucumber bath gel just to get the sweat off me."

"Look, by this time tomorrow we'll be celebrating our victory," Megan said. "We'll be deciding where we're going to go as soon as we get to San Francisco."

"Megan's right," Tommy leaned back in the booth and put his arm around Lindsay. "This is going to be a piece of cake. And then . . ."

"Look out, San Francisco," Bobby smiled.

"Look out, Bayside, is more like it," came a voice behind them. Everyone turned to see Pete Frederickson, the captain of Valley's *Smarts and Strength* team. He was sitting in the next booth.

"Right," Megan snorted.

"We're shaking in our boots," Tommy added.

"You should be," Pete said. "We scored four hundred points in our last match, beating our opponent by two hundred and twenty."

The gang exchanged glances. Four hundred was a lot of points, there was no denying it.

"You're just saying that because you know we've got what it takes to beat you," Megan replied.

Pete snickered. "We'll see about that tomorrow." He stood up and sauntered out of the Max.

"Look at it this way," Megan said when he was out of earshot. "They've already used up their best match. We're about to hit our peak."

"Right," Lindsay said. But she sounded doubtful. Four hundred points? The most they'd gotten was two hundred and eighty.

She hoped that the extra work with Screech and Mrs. Steele would pay off after all.

chapter

8

"Good afternoon, everybody," the announcer's voice boomed, "and welcome to our high school competition final!"

"I can't believe this is actually happening!" Lindsay said. The gang was backstage, waiting to be introduced. She peeked through the curtain—the place was packed.

"I'm feeling a little nervous," Tommy said. He wiped his hands on his baggy black jeans.

"You never get nervous," Bobby squeaked. "That makes me petrified!"

"Just relax and take a deep breath," Megan told them. "We've all done this before—it's nothing new."

"I didn't get home from work until eleven last night," Brian said, stifling a yawn. "Hey, Rachel, what's that?"

"What's what?" Rachel replied casually.

They all stopped talking as the announcer read off the names of the Valley team.

"Come on, it's time for our cheer," Bobby said.

"One for all—"

"We don't have time," Megan said.

Just then the announcer cried: "And now, representing Bayside High . . . Lindsay, Tommy, Bobby, Brian, Rachel, and Megan!"

They jogged out onto the stage, pumping their fists into the air. The Bayside fans in the audience hooted and cheered as they took their places at the contestants' table marked BAYSIDE.

When Bobby got to the table, he looked around in confusion. Usually Brian was right next to him. But the guy standing on his right was short and had straight dark hair. "Who are you?" Bobby asked.

As the guy started to laugh, Bobby heard someone call his name.

"Bobby! Get over here!" It was Tommy.

Suddenly Bobby realized what must have happened—he'd jogged over to the opponent's table! "Yikes!" he exclaimed. "Get me out of here!" He leaped into the air and bolted across the stage.

"What's wrong with you?" Megan asked, her hands on her hips.

"And here's the host with the most, the only man

who dares to ask the question: Are you as smart as you think? . . . Mister Skip Simon!

Skip bounded out onto the stage, smiling and waving to the audience. "Thanks for coming! We have an exciting show today."

"Excuse me, Skip?" Rachel's voice echoed through the studio as she spoke into the microphone on their table.

"Uh . . . yes?" Skip replied, looking confused.

"I just wanted to thank you for making this so much fun for all of us," she said. "And in honor of this being our last show with you, I'd like to give you this."

"What is she doing?" Megan asked as Rachel walked across the stage carrying a small package.

"This is very thoughtful," Skip said with a faint smile. "But I don't think I can take this from you." Rachel looked crestfallen as Skip placed the gift on the podium. "Judges? May I have a ruling?"

"No gifts can be given or accepted between the contestants and the host," a woman's voice called from the dark area offstage where the judges sat.

"I'm—I'm sorry," Rachel said, flustered. "I didn't know."

"Next time read the rules," the judge said flatly. "We won't disqualify you or your team, but Skip cannot accept the gift."

Skip hurled the gift across the stage, where it

landed in a large trash can. "Two points for Skip!" he said. The audience roared with laughter. "And now, let's get on with the game."

Rachel slunk back to the Bayside table. "Can you believe that? He threw out my present and everyone thinks it's funny!"

"How could you be so stupid?" Megan hissed. "You practically got us disqualified!"

"Rachel, that's the dumbest thing you've ever done," Brian agreed.

Rachel's lower lip jutted out in a pout. "I just wanted to do something nice," she wailed.

"Well, think twice before you do something nice," Megan said. "Then think again, and *then*, ask me if it's okay!"

"Who do you think you are?" Rachel retorted.

"And now it's time for our first athletic event . . ." Skip rummaged through the two hats of names. "On the balance beam, we'll have Andie from Valley, and Rachel from Bayside!"

"See if you can do *this* without messing up," Megan grumbled.

Rachel glared at her.

"Megan!" Lindsay exclaimed, shooting her a sharp look. "Come on, Rach, you're great at this event," Lindsay said encouragingly. "And you look fantastic!" Rachel was wearing a new red sweatshirt, black jeans, and a pair of red high-tops like Skip's.

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"Maybe she'll get points for fashion," Megan muttered. "She's not getting any for her brain!"

o o o

"And now, Bayside, what city in Germany is famous for its yearly Oktoberfest?"

Megan turned to Brian. He always answered the questions about Europe. But Brian hadn't even heard the question. He was fast asleep!

"Brian!" Tommy shook him by the shoulders. "Wake up!"

Brian groggily opened one eye.

"Three seconds," Skip said.

"What city in Germany has Oktoberfest?" Tommy asked. He looked like a police detective from an old movie, interrogating a prisoner. "Come on, think!"

BZZZZ!

"Sorry, Bayside. Valley, care to take a crack at it?"

"Munich," a player named Marcy said. "And it starts at the end of September."

"Twenty points for Valley!" Skip crowed.

He doesn't have to sound so happy about it, Megan thought. She glanced at the scoreboard over his head. Bayside 80, Valley 200. Not only were they behind, they were getting creamed. If they didn't get it together, they'd never be able to catch up.

First Rachel and her present, then her losing on the balance beam. Lindsay had answered a few

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questions right. But then Bobby had lost at the long jump. And now Brian was falling asleep right onstage. They were falling apart. I'm not, she corrected herself. *It's just that everyone else is.*

"Next question goes to Valley—here's your chance to move way ahead," Skip said. "What would a tennis player have to do to win the Grand Slam?"

The Valley team members looked at each other and shrugged; then Pete stepped up to the microphone. "You'd have to win Wimbledon, and that one in New York—the U.S. Open."

"That's your answer?" Skip asked.

Pete nodded, then looked uneasy.

"I'm afraid that's incorrect," Skip said. "Bayside?"

"Come on, Bobby," Megan whispered.

"The Grand Slam." Bobby chewed his thumbnail nervously. He still hadn't gotten over his blunder at the beginning of the show or his failed attempt at the long jump. "A player has to win four matches in one year. The French Open, Wimbledon, the U.S. Open, and the . . . Boston Marathon."

BZZZZ.

"Sorry, that is incorrect," Skip said.

"What did I say?" he whispered to Brian. But the only response he got was a snore.

"The Boston Marathon," Megan told him with a stony look. "That's not a tennis event."

"Oh, I meant the Boston Tea Party. I mean, the

Boston Red Sox. I mean, the Boston Patriots, only they became the New England Patriots back in—

"Forget it," Megan said, completely frustrated. "It's too late!" She should have known that when Bobby couldn't figure out which team he was on, he wasn't going to be much help!

"Next up, another exciting athletic event—the rope climb!" Skip said. "For Valley . . . Pete, their team captain, will compete. And for Bayside . . ." He pulled a name out of the hat. "Tommy!"

Megan felt a little surge of hope. If anyone could get them back on track, it was Tommy. He'd never lost an athletic event. If he won the rope climb, and she answered the next several questions right, then they might tie the match.

When Skip shouted, "GO!" Tommy and Pete took off at top speed. Tommy got to the wall first. But when he grabbed the rope and lifted his feet off the floor, he slid down to the ground.

Next to him, Pete grabbed the rope and got his feet on the wall. He started climbing up, hand over hand.

"Come on!" Megan yelled.

"You can do it, Tommy!" Lindsay shouted.

Tommy looked over at them, a panicked expression on his face. He grabbed the rope again and tried to climb. But it was too late: Pete had crossed the finish line.

Megan threw up her hands in disgust. "What is it with everyone today?"

"Valley, twenty-five points, Bayside, zero," Skip announced.

"Skip, I couldn't get a grip on the rope," Tommy complained. He walked over to the host. "I think it's been greased."

"I'm sorry, Tommy," Skip said. "Pete ran a better race than you did. Those are the breaks."

"The breaks? But somebody greased this rope—it's impossible to climb," Tommy protested.

"Tommy, if you could just go back to your team."

"No! I'm not budging until somebody tells me what's going on," Tommy said, shaking his head. "I think this race was fixed, and I know who fixed it!" He jabbed a finger at the Valley players.

"Tommy," Skip put a hand on his shoulder. "If you don't go back to your team right now, I'm going to have to—"

"Why won't anyone believe me?" Tommy complained. "Since when do you allow cheating?"

BZZZZ. "Bayside High has been charged with unsportsmanlike conduct," one of the judges said.

"Oh, great," Megan muttered.

"Bayside will be penalized by a one-hundred-point deduction."

Megan glanced up at the scoreboard. Their

glowing eighty disappeared and a minus twenty appeared. "I can't believe this!" she wailed.

Tommy gave one last disgusted look at Skip and the Valley team, then walked back to his friends. "This is so unfair!" he whispered hoarsely. "That rope was greased! I'm not a bad sport."

"Could have fooled me," Megan said with a frown. "Thanks for putting us in even worse shape than we already were!"

"You believe me, don't you, Linds?" Tommy asked. He turned toward his girlfriend.

"I don't know what to believe," Lindsay whispered. Her brown eyes were mournful. "But you shouldn't have called everyone cheaters and liars just because you lost."

"But they *did* cheat," Tommy said, looking hurt.

"Okay, teams!" Skip grinned. "Our next question goes to Bayside. This is a tough one. Who served as vice president of the United States during the years 1952 to 1960, and whom did he serve?"

Megan tossed her head defiantly and stepped up to the microphone. "Gee, Skip, I don't know. Would that be Donald Duck? I think he was vice president, and Mickey Mouse was president. Am I right?"

"Megan!" Lindsay cried.

"Sorry, Bayside, but that is incorrect," Skip was looking at Megan as if she had grown a second head.

"What are you doing, Megan?" Brian asked.

Megan turned to him. "Oh, so you've decided to come back from the living dead," she replied hotly. "Well, I was just returning the favor." If nobody else on the team was going to try, why should she? They were already losers and the laughingstock of town. She might as well pile on the humiliation!

o o o

"And Valley High wins the first Smarts and Strength High School Special Competition!" Skip announced ten minutes later as half the audience cheered. "They'll be taking an all-expenses-paid trip to San Francisco!"

Lindsay glared at the Valley team. Normally, she would have been the first to congratulate them. But she was so upset about what had happened in the last half hour that she could barely speak.

"Sorry, Team Bayside," Skip said in his phony voice. "You gave it your best shot, but sometimes you just come up short."

"Gave it our best shot?" Bobby said under his breath. "I don't *think* so."

"Oh, like you helped?" Megan said. "Mr. Space Cadet?"

"Excuse me, Queen of the Universe," Bobby shot back. "Not everyone is as brilliant as you are!"

"Or acts like little dictators!" Brian added.

"Well, you're like one of the seven dwarfs—Sleepy!" Rachel exclaimed.

"Don't forget, Bayside," Skip interrupted nervously. "We have some fine parting gifts for you. Runners-up are winners in our book, too!"

"Some winners," Megan muttered.

"At least some of us tried, Mickey Mouse," Tommy said hotly.

"Okay! Tune in next time for another exciting match on *Smarts and Strength*," Skip said. "The show that wants to know if you're as strong as you think! Bye-bye, everybody!"

As soon as the theme music started playing and the show officially ended, the gang started arguing all over again.

Lindsay covered her ears. She'd never seen her friends like this, and she didn't like it. Not one bit. "Maybe if we knew how to be a team instead of thinking about ourselves, we'd still be friends right now!" Lindsay cried. She turned and ran out of the studio.

"Lindsay! Wait!" Tommy called. He ran after her.

But Lindsay didn't wait. She didn't feel like talking to any of them after the way they'd just treated one another. She never thought her friends would turn on each other.

She'd been wrong.

9

"What's with the emergency message?" Brian asked. He had just walked into the Pickin' Chicken. "I came over as soon as I got it."

"What happened at the show?" Wendy asked, ignoring his question.

"Valley won, and I *don't* want to talk about it," Brian said with a shudder. "That wasn't the emergency, was it? And shouldn't you call your dad when there's an emergency here?"

"I would, but he's . . . he's out of town for the week. Weekend, I mean. I can't think straight," Wendy said. She put her hand on the counter to steady herself, then fanned her face with a plastic tray. "I feel like I'm about to pass out."

"What's wrong?" Brian asked. "Here, sit down." He dragged a chair over and guided her onto it.

"Thanks," Wendy said with a feeble smile. "I feel terrible. My stomach's upset. I think I have a fever. And I kind of see stars every time I lean over." Wendy groaned and dabbed her forehead with a napkin. "I have to go home and get some rest, and I need you to take over for me."

"But this is the first night I've had off in a week," Brian complained. "And I'm totally worn out."

"I'm sorry," Wendy said. She was already taking off her apron. "If I felt any better, I'd stay, really. But I shouldn't be handling food when I'm in a state like this." She stood up, took a few steps, and swerved.

Brian sighed. "Okay. Go home and get some rest."

"Oh, thank you, thank you," Wendy said. "You're a lifesaver, Brian. It shouldn't be that bad. It's been really dead." She took off her cap and grabbed her backpack from underneath the counter. As she walked toward the door, she began brushing her hair.

She sure has a lot of energy for someone who's not feeling well, Brian thought. *And what's with the hairbrush? Isn't she going straight home to bed?*

"Make sure you drink a lot of water," Brian called after her as she pushed open the door.

"Water?" Wendy looked confused. "Oh, right. Water. That's good for a fever. I'll definitely have a huge glass as soon as I get home. Then I'm crawling straight into bed. Thanks, Brian. See you later!"

After Wendy left, Brian did some quick cleaning.

Then he made sure everything was well stocked. He had helped a few customers and was clearing a tray from a table by the window when a fancy white convertible stopped at a red light in front of the store.

Isn't that Wendy? he thought as he watched a blond girl in the backseat blow a huge bubble-gum bubble. She was sitting in some guy's lap, giggling as he tickled her.

Brian raked a hand through his hair. *This day is going from bad to worse.*

Brian shook his head as he watched the car disappear around a bend. He was pretty sure now that Wendy had swiped that twenty dollars and let him cough it back up. And now she'd gotten away with something else.

But this was the last time he'd let her take advantage of him. The next time he saw her, he was going to give her a piece of his mind.

o o o

"Aren't you going to talk to me?" Tommy asked.

It was Monday morning, and he'd been waiting at Lindsay's locker for fifteen minutes. "You didn't call me back all weekend. Lindsay, what's going on?"

Lindsay twirled the combination lock. "I don't want to talk about it."

"But Lindsay . . ."

"I'm really upset about what happened on Friday."

okay?" she said. "And I don't feel like talking to any one on my so-called team!"

"I wasn't making that up about Valley cheating," Tommy pleaded. "You've got to believe me!"

"I already told you, I don't know what to believe," she said. Her eyes were full of sadness. "I thought we were all best friends. But friends would never treat each other the way we did when we started losing that dumb match."

"But I'm not just your friend," Tommy said, putting his hand on her arm. "We're closer than that."

"I know," Lindsay said with a sigh. Tommy was trying to reach out to her, and she couldn't turn her back on him. She took his hand and gave it a little squeeze. "I'm sorry, Tommy. I guess I just couldn't handle seeing everyone yell at each other like that. I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

"That's okay," Tommy said. "I know you were just feeling bad." He kissed Lindsay lightly on the cheek.

Just then Lindsay saw Megan coming toward them. She walked straight ahead, as if Tommy and Lindsay weren't even there. She probably would have kept on going, too. But Bobby came around the corner and stepped in front of her.

"Excuse me," Megan said in an irritated voice.

"Megan—hi," Bobby said. "I'm so glad I almost ran into you. Can't we just forget everything and be friends?"

"You're in my way," Megan said stonily. Then she stepped to the side and walked right past him.

Lindsay took her books out of her locker and closed the door. "Now do you see what I'm talking about?" she said sadly.

This was serious.

o o o

"I'm extremely disappointed in you," Mr. Belding said. He had summoned the *Smarts and Strength* team into his office during lunch period on Tuesday. "And it's not because you lost. Well, of course I'm disappointed about your losing. But I'm not upset. Well, maybe a little upset . . ."

"I think what you meant to say, sir," Screech interrupted, "is that of course it was awful to lose, but it's the *way* they lost that's so terrible."

Megan slouched down in her chair. *No kidding*, she thought. All the horrible things her friends—no, her ex-friends—had said to her were still running through her head. *Little dictator*. Okay, maybe she had gotten a little carried away. But these people had totally humiliated her. Let her down.

She'd had to sit in biology class, where everyone gave her sad, sympathetic looks. Only Dave had smiled, and that was because he was gloating—she was sure of it! Everyone in school was thinking that she wasn't as smart as she thought she was. That

she couldn't do it all, the way she'd told Dave she could. And it was all thanks to her supposed friends.

"Screech is right. Hasn't anyone in here ever heard of being a good sport?" Mr. Belding asked.

Nobody said anything.

"It's fine to lose. We all lose sometimes," Mr. Belding said. "But it's *not* fine to lose badly. Tommy, you accused Valley of cheating—"

"I was telling the truth!" Tommy said defensively.

"And you all started blaming each other—while the cameras were still rolling!"

"Winning isn't everything," Screech said.

"It's the only thing," Bobby said. "The famous coach Vince Lombardi said that."

"Where was your sports trivia when we needed it?" Megan muttered.

Bobby glared at her.

"People, you're still not getting the point!" Mr. Belding said.

"It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game!" Screech put in.

"Right," Mr. Belding said.

"Right," Megan heard Lindsay murmur. "And we played it terribly."

"What do you have to say for yourselves?" Mr. Belding asked.

Megan shifted in her chair. Tommy coughed. And Bobby twirled the cord to the venetian blinds.

"We're sorry?" Rachel said in a soft voice.

Mr. Belding nodded. "That's a start. Does anyone else have something to say?"

The room was silent.

"I've never heard you guys be so quiet in my life!"

Mr. Belding joked. But nobody cracked a smile. "Frankly, this is really starting to worry me."

Me, too, Megan thought. But she wasn't about to apologize to anyone. After all, she wasn't the one who'd lost the match.

o o o

"Honesty is totally overrated," Tommy mumbled on his way out of Mr. Belding's office.

"Tell me about it," Brian agreed. Then he remembered they weren't speaking to each other. He looked at Tommy and shrugged, feeling nervous. "I work with a chronic liar," he explained. "I'm beginning to wonder if being honest is worth it."

"You believe me, don't you?" Tommy asked. He sounded desperate. "Man, I'm getting sick of asking people that! But I was telling the truth about that rope. It was greased, and Valley must have done it!"

"I believe you," Bobby said. He fell into step beside them. "What I don't believe is that Mrs. Steele called me a spineless wimp when I passed her in the hall today."

Tommy and Brian laughed.

"Poor Mrs. Steele," Tommy said. "I'll bet she never coached anyone to *defeat* before. She's probably more upset than we are."

"Hey, you guys, I'm sorry about the stuff I said on Friday," Brian said.

Tommy nodded. "Me, too."

"Yeah," Bobby agreed. "I wasn't thinking. I was in a total daze after cramming for the match. It was like my brain was flooded—totally underwater!"

"At least you stayed conscious," Brian told him with a grin.

"Hey," Tommy said. He stopped and turned toward his friends. "I was wondering if you guys would help me prove I wasn't being unsportsmanlike about that rope."

"Sure," Bobby said. "Do you have a plan?"

"Not really. But if there was some way we could spy on the Valley team—you know, get them to talk about how they won—they might admit that they greased the rope."

"How are we going to do that?" Bobby asked.

"They *know* us."

"That's the problem," Tommy admitted.

As Brian listened, a plan began to form in his mind. His eyes lit up. "I might know somebody who could help," he said.

"Wendy, I need to talk to you." Brian grabbed his cap from the hook on the wall and pulled the beak down over his forehead.

"Sure," Wendy replied. "What about?"

"Well, it's not that I don't like you or anything," he began slowly. "But working with you hasn't exactly been fun."

"What do you mean?" Wendy looked shocked. "We always have a great time talking."

"Actually, you talk, and I work. And you sort of weasel your way out of everything. Like the other day when you asked me to fill in for you because you were sick? Only you weren't sick; you just wanted to go out with your friends."

Wendy started to protest, but Brian cut her off. "Don't try to deny it," he said. "I *saw* you in that white convertible."

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Wendy looked down at the floor.

"And before that, you showed up an hour late—"

"I was upset!" Wendy exclaimed.

"Maybe so, but not too upset to tamper with the time clock so that it looked like you got here on time," Brian pointed out.

Wendy folded her arms across her chest. "You're only the assistant night manager," she said. "You don't run this place."

"Maybe not, but I am your co-worker. And co-workers should treat each other with respect," Brian said. He was quiet for a minute, then added, "And what about that missing twenty dollars?"

"I didn't take it," Wendy said firmly.

Brian leaned against the shiny metal counter. He figured if he kept quiet, Wendy would start talking, and the truth would probably slip out.

"Okay, maybe I dropped a twenty," she admitted. "But I was going to put it back! It was just that my dad showed up, and I was afraid that if he knew I'd made a mistake like that he'd make me work somewhere horrible like the storeroom or something."

"And?" Brian asked.

"And . . . okay, maybe I have tried to get out of a couple of hours of work. I just don't have the time to put in all these hours!" Wendy wailed. "It's like I have to give up my entire social life!"

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"I know," Brian said. "Because I gave mine up."

Wendy went back to staring at the floor. Brian could tell she felt bad. He had her right where he wanted her.

"I could tell your father all this," Brian said. "He'd probably fire you, and maybe I'd get a raise."

Wendy looked up at him, her face full of panic. "You're not really going to do that, are you? I'll take some of your hours," she sputtered frantically. "I'll give you some of my pay, I'll—"

"Relax, Wendy. I have a simple solution," Brian said with a grin. "I'll keep all this to myself if you'll do a little spying for me. We think Valley cheated at the *Smarts and Strength* competition last week, and we want to prove it."

"Cheated? No way." Wendy shook her head.

"You're only saying that because you got creamed."

"Are you saying you won't help me?" Brian asked, raising an eyebrow. "Because I could go call your dad right now." Brian pulled a quarter out of his pocket and tossed it into the air.

"Okay, okay," Wendy said with a sigh. "Tell me what I have to do."

Brian grinned. "Right. Here's the plan. . . ."

o o o

"What's that crackling noise?" Bobby asked. It was Thursday afternoon, and he, Brian, and Tommy

were over at Brian's house. "I can hardly hear what she's saying."

"She told me she was trying to act casual when she talked to them, so she was eating a bag of potato chips," Brian explained.

Tommy and Bobby gave him an incredulous look.

Brian shrugged. "I told you she's a little loony. Anyway, it gets better." He turned up the volume on his tape player. "Listen to this."

"It was incredible the way you walked all over Bayside," Wendy was saying. "I had to work that day so I taped it, which is a drag because I would have loved to have been in the studio audience. But this job. Ugh, you wouldn't believe how terrible it is. You know, over at my dad's restaurant? Well, I don't know if you can really call it a restaurant, but—"

"Is she going to stop talking long enough to let Pete say anything?" Tommy asked.

"Shh," Brian said. "It's coming."

"Yeah, well, one of the reasons work's so awful is that I work with one of those guys from the Bayside team. And let me tell you, he thinks he's a king or something. I couldn't have been happier when he came crawling into work and told me how you guys creamed them."

"Pulverized is more like it," Pete bragged. "Which guy do you work with?"

"Brian Keller," Wendy said.

"You mean the guy who fell asleep?" Pete laughed.

Tommy and Bobby both cracked up.

"Don't say anything," Brian warned, blushing.

"Yeah. Can you believe that guy? He thinks he knows everything about Europe, just because he's from Sweden or Switzerland or something," Wendy jabbered. "And what was with that guy who threw a fit just because he lost the rope climb?"

"He's probably still trying to get a grip on that rope," Pete snorted.

"What a loser!" Wendy said. "Brian told me that guy's on the football team—yeah, right! Like he's coordinated enough to even walk down the street!"

"Actually, Tommy DeLuca is a good athlete."

"No way," Wendy said. She sounded shocked.

"The only reason he couldn't climb up that wall was because we smeared Crisco all over his rope. Just seeing the look of horror on his face made doing it worthwhile, too," he added. "It was hilarious!"

Tommy scowled. "I'd like to pound that guy," he said quietly.

"So would I," Brian agreed. "But I'd rather have that trip to San Francisco." He rewound the tape and ejected it from the cassette deck. "There's a certain television producer who needs to hear this tape," he said, standing up.

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Bobby and Brian leaped to their feet. "Right," they chorused. "Let's go!"

o o o

Alison Bridgeley shut off the tape player and shook her head. "Are you telling me this tape is authentic?" she asked.

Brian's jaw dropped. It had never occurred to him that the people at *Smarts and Strength* wouldn't believe their story. "Yes, it is," he said solemnly.

Alison sighed. "Why would Valley want to cheat?"

"Valley and Bayside have a huge rivalry that goes back about a hundred years," Bobby explained.

"And we beat them last season in football," Tommy added. "They vowed revenge right on the field."

"I hate to see this kind of thing on our show," Alison said. "It's very bad for our reputation." She was quiet for a moment, thinking.

"All we're asking for is a rematch," Brian said. "You can use whatever reason you want. If we lose, we won't say another word about it."

Alison drummed her fingers on the desk. "I suppose a rematch is the best idea, given the circumstances," she finally said. She pushed her chair back and got to her feet. "How does a special Saturday morning edition sound—two days from now?"

"It sounds great," Brian said with a grin.

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"Good. I'll have Skip announce it on today's show," she said.

"Thanks so much for listening, Ms. Bridgeley," Bobby said, springing to his feet.

"You're welcome," she said graciously. "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get to work on another project."

The boys practically floated out of Allison's office and down the hall to the exit.

"All we have to do is get our team back together," Brian said when they got outside.

"Easier said than done," Bobby said. "Megan only stopped scowling at me today long enough to tell me to move out of her way."

"Well, they'll listen when they know what it's about," Tommy said. "We have a chance to get our reputations back. Who could pass that up?"

"All I know is, I'm not calling Megan to let her know about the meeting," Bobby said. "And just to be on the safe side, I think I'll go buy myself a bullet-proof vest!"

chapter



"I wouldn't be on television with her for anything in the world!" Rachel cried. She glared at Megan. "And I don't want to spend a weekend in San Francisco with somebody who thinks I'm stupid, either—even if the shopping is really great."

"You think I want to be on a team with you?" Megan snorted. "You practically got us disqualified because of a stupid crush—"

"Girls, girls," Brian said. He held his hands in the air like a referee.

"It is not a stupid crush," Rachel cut him off. She was practically shouting now. "You're just mad because you and Dave broke up!"

"I'm hardly the kind of person who lets her love life interfere with everything else," Megan replied. "You must have me confused with yourself!"

"Come on, you guys," Lindsay said. "We called this meeting to see if we could work things out!" At first, Lindsay wasn't sure she could forgive and forget. But after a couple of days, she realized something: She really missed her friends.

"Right," Bobby agreed. "We have to pull together and show Valley who's boss tomorrow."

"Forget it," Megan said. "I'm not going back on TV so we can look like idiots all over again."

"You think we should forfeit and look like a bunch of chickens?" Tommy asked.

"Don't mention chicken," Brian said. "I don't have to be at work for another half hour."

"I thought you were cutting back on your hours," Rachel said.

"I am, but they have to hire someone first," Brian said. "I might have this weekend off, though—maybe we could do something." He scooted closer to her, but she turned away.

"You mean you're going to work all night so you can fall asleep on the show tomorrow," Megan said.

"Come on, you guys!" Tommy said. "We didn't bribe a Valley student and beg Alison for a rematch just so we could get into a huge fight all over again."

"Tommy's right," Brian said. "We need to work things out so we can go on TV and win."

"As far as I'm concerned, last Friday was bad enough—I don't need to relive it this week, too!"

Megan said. She tossed her napkin onto the table and stood up. "You can count me out."

"What is *with* her?" Tommy asked as Megan stalked out of the Max. He leaned back against his seat.

Lindsay shook her head sadly. "I don't know," she said. "I've never seen Megan like this. I mean, she's always been a little hardheaded, but this is weird."

"What about everyone else?" Tommy asked. "Can the rest of us work together as a team?"

Everyone looked at each other.

Rachel shrugged. "Fine with me," she said.

"I'll do it," Lindsay added.

"All right!" Tommy said. He squeezed her hand.

Lindsay sighed. "I never want to fight like that again," she said. "I've missed you guys! And even if we lose, nobody's allowed to start blaming each other—for anything. Okay?"

Bobby nodded. "I'm with that."

"Yeah, me, too," Rachel said. "And I'm sorry, you guys, for anything mean that I said."

"So am I," Tommy said with a nod.

"This is great," Brian said. "We've got another shot on the show, we're friends again . . ." He smiled at Rachel. "Who knows what could happen?"

"Wait a minute," Bobby said. He looked panicked. "We only have five people on our team. Wasn't there a rule about needing six people to compete?"

"Maybe we can get somebody to replace Megan," Rachel suggested.

"We'd better call Alison and find out," Brian said, pulling a quarter out of his pocket. "I'll be right back."

"Hello, troops," Screech said as soon as Brian had walked away. Screech was looking over the top of the next booth. "Couldn't help overhearing—because I was eavesdropping!" he said with a sheepish grin. "And since you're having a rematch tomorrow, I thought I'd offer some late-night coaching!"

Bobby held up both hands. "No more, Screech," he said emphatically. "I'm going to stick with what I know. When I tried to cram all that chemical, geographical, mathematical, and historical information into my brain, it went on overload."

"The old hard disk crashed," Screech said with a nod. "What about you, Rachel? I could call Mrs. Steele—"

"No!" Rachel cried. "I'm going to bed early tonight and getting a great night's sleep."

"You guys are probably right. All that coaching was a waste," Screech said. He looked dejected.

"No, it wasn't," Lindsay told him earnestly. "We just went into overdrive. But we appreciate everything you did for us."

"Except dropping an encyclopedia on your foot," Screech said shyly.

"That I could have lived without," Lindsay agreed with a grin.

"Bad news," Brian said as he came back to the table. "Alison said we can't substitute anyone on our team. We'd have to forfeit."

"Megan has to show up tomorrow," Lindsay said.

"But she won't," Rachel said. "And we can't win without her—even if she is acting like a total brat."

"I might have a plan that'll get Megan on the show tomorrow," Screech said. He tapped his finger against his chin thoughtfully. "And don't worry—it doesn't involve Mrs. Steele!"

o o o

"Thanks again for taping Pete," Brian told Wendy that night at work. "People at Valley aren't mad at you, are they?"

Wendy shook her head. "Not really. Most people are angry at the team for cheating. But look out: They really want to win now."

"We're not worried," Brian said. He tried to sound confident. *I just hope Screech's plan works, whatever it is*, he thought. *We need Megan!* "Hey, do you mind if I take a short break?" he asked. "I'm starving."

"Go ahead," Wendy said.

Brian grabbed a burger and some onion rings and put them on a tray. He was so burned out on Spicy Spuds he didn't even like them anymore—

maybe because his uniform smelled like them no matter how many times he washed it.

I wonder if Rachel will go out with me this weekend, he thought as he sat down at a table. She hadn't mentioned Skip Simon's name all afternoon. It was time for Brian to make his move. He just had to think of a way for him and Rachel to spend some time alone. . . .

"Hello, kids, how's it going?" a voice called out from the kitchen area. It was Mr. Hansen. He pressed a button on the cash register and the drawer slid open. "Kind of a slow night, huh?" he said.

"Pretty slow," Brian agreed.

Mr. Hansen frowned when he saw Brian sitting at one of the tables. "Weren't you taking a break this afternoon when I came by?" he asked pointedly.

"Uh . . ." *Whoops*, Brian thought, *busted*. "Yeah, I guess I was. But it's been so slow—"

"Are you saying there's nothing else you could be doing?" Mr. Hansen asked. He sounded annoyed. "I see some mopping that could be done."

"Yes sir," Brian said. He popped the last bite of his hamburger into his mouth. Then he stood up and headed back into the kitchen.

Mr. Hansen cleared his throat. "I don't see any slips in here for employee meals," he went on.

Brian stopped in his tracks. Each time they bought food for themselves with their discount, they

were supposed to put the receipt in a special slot in back of the register. "I didn't pay for that yet—I was just about to," he said. He set his tray down on the counter and pulled out his wallet.

Mr. Hansen shook his head. "I don't like what I'm seeing here, Brian. Taking extra breaks, taking food without paying. Do you think this is a free ride?"

"No, of course not, sir," Brian said. "I'm very sorry for these oversights. They won't happen again."

"Brian never does anything against the rules," Wendy offered.

"Wendy, this is between the boss and his employee. Please stay out of it," Mr. Hansen said in a stern voice. "I know that you've put in lots of hours here, Brian, and at the beginning I thought you were excellent management material. But now I find that I'm forced to rethink everything. I've had a few complaints about the food not being served quickly."

"But that's my—," Wendy began.

"I'm not telling you again, Wendy; this is between me and Brian!" Mr. Hansen thundered. His face was red as he turned back to Brian. "What do you have to say for yourself?" he asked.

Brian thought it over. He could beg Mr. Hansen to let him keep his job and work until he had enough money for that bike. But then the rest of the year would belong to Pickin' Chicken.

Or he could give up his job, hang out with his

friends—now that they were friends again—and spend the hundred and fifty dollars he'd earned on something else.

"Well?" Mr. Hansen demanded.

"Mr. Hansen, I've really enjoyed working here, and I'd hate to lose my job," Brian said. "But . . ."

"Can you explain these mistakes?"

Brian shrugged.

"Then you leave me no choice," Mr. Hansen said.

"I'm going to have to let you go."

Brian felt like a huge weight had just been lifted off his shoulders. "Thanks for giving me a try, anyway," he said as he grabbed his knapsack from underneath the counter. He headed for the door, his step light and quick. "See you later, Wendy," he said.

"Good luck tomorrow," she said.

"Brian, I think you're forgetting something," Mr. Hansen pointed to his head.

"Oh, right," he said. Brian took off the Pickin' Chicken cap and tossed it across the room like a Frisbee.

He was free!

On Saturday morning, Megan was pouring herself a glass of orange juice when there was a knock at the door. "I'll get it!" she yelled to her parents.

When she opened the door, she was surprised to see Screech standing on the doorstep. "Good morning, Megan!" he said cheerfully.

"What's good about it?" she grumbled. She and Dave still weren't talking. Her friends hated her. And they'd lost miserably on *Smarts and Strength*.

"Thank you, I will come in," Screech said. He stepped past her into the house.

Megan shuffled back to the kitchen. "I'm having toast," she said. "Would you like some?"

"Why, certainly," Screech replied.

Megan dropped a slice of whole wheat bread into the toaster and sat down across the table from

Screech. "So what's up?" she asked. "You didn't come over just for a piece of toast."

"Well, I'm supposed to be taking the *Bayside Smarts and Strength* team out to breakfast this morning," Screech said.

Megan got up to check the toast. She didn't feel like talking about the show.

"But I woke up this morning and I thought, 'Who wants to be seen hanging around a bunch of losers?'" Screech said as Megan buttered the toast and slid the plate onto the table in front of him. "Besides, it doesn't matter if I try to psych them up for today's rematch or not. They're going to lose."

Megan took a sip of orange juice.

"You should be glad you're not going on TV with them today," Screech went on. "I mean, it's one thing to lose once. But twice?" He clucked his tongue.

"They might not lose," Megan said.

"Are you kidding?" Screech said. "First of all, they might not even get to play because there's some silly rule about not being allowed to change team members."

Megan felt a pang of guilt, but she ignored it.

"But let's say they get past that. Without you they don't stand a chance. You were the only one on that team who knew anything!"

"That's not *exactly* true," Megan said.

"Sure it is!" Screech's voice squeaked. "I was your

coach, and I should know. I still *am* their coach, actually. But I'm thinking of resigning before my reputation for intelligence vanishes completely."

"They're not that bad," Megan said. "Brian's smart, especially when it comes to history . . ."

"Sure, if he can stay awake long enough to listen to the question!" Screech complained. "And Tommy won't get anything right unless it involves auto mechanics. You know, I'm still not sure the grease on that rope didn't come from his hands."

Megan frowned. As angry as she had been at Tommy, she knew he'd never do anything dumb like that. She believed he'd been set up.

"And Rachel can't even hear the questions because she's too busy daydreaming about marrying Skip Simon." Screech shook his head. "With a team like that, why even bother showing up? Bobby's hopeless—he used to know sports, but now he's so confused he couldn't even tell you how old he is. And Lindsay!" Screech rolled his eyes. "You'd think I dropped an encyclopedia on her brain instead of her foot!"

"Stop it!" Megan suddenly cried. "Stop talking about my friends that way!"

"But Megan." Screech looked hurt. "I'm just saying what *you've* been saying all along."

"Well, then I've been wrong," Megan admitted. "I know everyone tried really hard in the finals. We

didn't lose because we were stupid. It was because we were too wrapped up in winning." She paused for a second. "And that was my fault." *I was acting like a little dictator*, she realized. *Just because I happen to be pretty smart. And because of my fight with Daze.*

"Part of it's my fault," Screech said. "I guess I pushed everyone too hard."

"Yeah, but at least you were supposed to," Megan said. "You're the coach. I was supposed to be one of their teammates, only I ended up ordering everyone around and taking all the credit."

"Just a teensy-weensy bit." Screech held two fingers up, about a half inch apart.

Megan laughed. Somehow, she felt better already. "So what should I do?" she asked.

"You could try apologizing," Screech said. "Everyone wants you back on the team."

"So I'd have to go back on TV?" Megan asked.

"What's so scary about that?" Screech said.

Megan sighed. "Screech, I've never lost at anything before. I just couldn't go through it again."

"Maybe it'll get easier each time," Screech said.

"I don't want it to get easier! I want to be the best at whatever I do," Megan said.

"That's part of who you are, Megan," Screech said. "But you can't expect your friends to be the same way. That'd be like Tommy expecting you to

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like fixing cars, or Rachel expecting you to shop six hours straight every Saturday."

"Both of which would be absolute torture," Megan said, nodding. She didn't want to go back on television again, but her friends needed her.

There was only one thing to do.

o o o

"There's only five minutes until show time, and I don't see Megan anywhere," Tommy said with a frown.

Lindsay looked around. "Me, neither," she said. "But I'm trying to think positive."

"Good morning, everyone, and welcome to a special edition of *Smarts and Strength!*" the announcer said. Through Tommy's and Lindsay's efforts, they'd managed to get a full studio audience. They'd spent half the night calling all their friends and asking them to come support Team Bayside.

"What are we going to do?" Brian said, looking frantic. "They're about to announce us!"

"Here she comes!" Bobby cried.

Megan was running toward them, Screech right behind her. "Is it too late?" she gasped.

"Nope," Lindsay said with a relieved sigh. "You're right on time."

"With thirty seconds to spare," Bobby added.

"Good." Megan dropped her purse onto the floor

May the Best Team Win

and looked at her friends. "I'm really sorry I acted like such a jerk," she said. "I guess I felt like if I didn't win at the game, I'd be a failure at everything."

"And now, representing Bayside High in the rematch of the century . . .," the announcer said ominously.

"Anyway, you guys are way more important than my dumb pride," Megan said quickly. "I'm sorry I yelled at everyone." She turned to Rachel. "Especially you."

"That's okay," Rachel said, giving Megan a quick hug. "And you were right about one thing," she added with a giggle. "Skip Simon is a little too old for me."

Thank goodness! Brian thought.

". . . and their team captain, Megan!" the announcer boomed.

"Let's do it, guys!" Megan shouted. She stepped aside to let everyone run onstage before her.

"One for all and all for one!" Brian shouted.

"And three for a quarter!" Screech added, pumping his fist into the air. "Go, Bayside!"

chapter

13

"Well, folks, we've got quite the squeaker here." Skip tapped the index cards in his hand against the podium. "In case you've just tuned in, shame on you!" The audience laughed and applauded. "But the score you need to know is: Valley High, one hundred forty, Bayside High, one hundred eighty."

"Come on, guys," Megan whispered. "We can do it."

"Next question goes to Bayside. This one's a two-parter. What is the motto of the United States Marine Corps and what does it mean?" Skip asked.

Bobby stepped up to the microphone. "*Semper fidelis*," he said, "meaning 'always faithful.'"

"Correct!" Skip cried. "Thirty points!"

"All right, Bobby!" Brian said. He clapped his friend on the back.

May the Best Team Win

"Valley, here's your question," Skip said as he selected another index card. "What is a polymer?"

"It's a long molecule made up of a chain of simpler, smaller molecules," Marcy Scherer said.

"Twenty points for Valley! Bayside, back to you. When did the Klondike gold rush occur?"

"In the 1890s," Rachel said clearly, before anyone else had a chance to think. "In northwestern Canada."

"Correct!" Skip cried.

The audience cheered, and Rachel beamed.

Lindsay felt as if she was about to keel over for the third time that day. Bobby and Rachel had been answering questions right all morning, and Rachel hadn't gotten lost in a daydream about Skip yet. *Nothing like a good night's sleep*, she thought.

"Okay, now we'll move on to everyone's favorite athletic event—the balance beam," Skip said. "For Valley, we'll have . . . Pete, and for Bayside . . . Megan. It's the battle of the team captains, everybody! Come on over!" He waved to Megan and Pete.

"On your mark . . . get set . . . go!" Skip cried a minute later.

Megan scooted down the balance beam in her stocking feet while Pete struggled just to stay on the beam. He held his arms out at his sides and did a lot of wobbling. It was no contest!

"Bayside scores another twenty-five points!" Skip

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said. "And we'll be back with our final questions right after this!"

Megan ran over to the Bayside team. "Nice going, captain," Brian said with a grin.

"Thanks. You guys are doing great!" Megan said.

"We've got to hold on for the win," Bobby said.

"We will," Lindsay said, smiling at her friends. "I just know it."

o o o

"You won by a hundred points," Mr. Belding said. He shook his head happily. "I still can't believe it." He gazed around the Max, his chin resting on his hand. "I wonder if *Smarts and Strength* will ever have a national competition," he went on, his eyes lit up.

"Sir, I think Team Bayside has had enough competition for a while," Screech said.

"Screech is right," Megan said. She took a sip of her celebratory chocolate milk shake.

"But you're practically a local hero," Mr. Belding objected. "When you answered that question about the Spanish-American War, my heart almost burst with pride."

"No offense, Mr. B., but I think you're getting a little carried away with this winning thing," Megan said. "Let me tell you—it's a big mistake." And boy, would I know, she thought.

May the Best Team Win

Just then Dave strolled into the Max. He was by himself, and he sat down at a table near the door.

"I have someone I need to talk to," Megan said, getting to her feet. Taking a deep breath, she walked over to Dave's table.

"Hi," she said. "Can we talk for a second?"

Dave looked up at her nervously. "Uh, sure."

Megan pulled out a chair and sat down. "I want to apologize," she said, "for acting like such a jerk."

Dave smiled. "I was pretty jerky, too," he admitted. "Even though I think that some of the things I said were true."

Megan sighed. "I know," she said. "The thing is, I thought I could handle everything. I had to learn the hard way that I can't."

"You did really well on the show today," Dave said. "I wanted to run up and congratulate you, but then I remembered I couldn't."

"It's not too late," Megan hinted.

"Congratulations," Dave said with a grin.

"Thanks," Megan replied. "Listen, I know everything is up in the air with us, but maybe we could go out sometime and see what happens."

Dave nodded. "Sounds good."

"Great," Megan said. She stood up to go. "I'll see you later, then."

"Later."

As Megan walked back to her table, she grinned.

It felt good to have worked things out. And who knew? Maybe she and Dave would get back together.

"So, Rachel, are you really over Skip Simon?" Brian asked.

"Like you wouldn't believe," Rachel said. "I ran into him in the hall after the show, you know? Only before I got to him, this woman was all over him, giving him a big kiss. Turns out she's his wife."

"He's married?" Lindsay asked, her eyes wide.

"With two kids!" Rachel exclaimed. "He sure didn't mention *that* in his little article!"

The gang exchanged secret smiles as they nodded understandingly.

"And he actually had the nerve to congratulate me for being such a good contestant—after he threw my present in the trash in front of thousands of people!" she went on. "I'm burning all my red clothes as soon as I get home!" she declared. She took off her red barrette and tossed it onto the table.

"So, how about catching a movie with me tomorrow night?" Brian asked, flashing her a smile.

"Don't you have to work?" Rachel asked.

"Nope," Brian said. "Not tomorrow or ever again."

"Did you quit?" Bobby asked.

"In a manner of speaking," Brian said. "And boy, am I glad to have my weekends and nights back," he added, looking at Rachel. "So what do you say?"

"I say, okay," Rachel replied.

"I'm so excited about our trip to San Francisco," Lindsay said. "It's only a few weeks away."

"Really?" Rachel looked worried. "Cancel that date, Brian. I've got to start packing!"

"Well, we still have to get a chaperon," Megan said. "And I know my parents won't be able to do it."

"Mine, either," Lindsay said.

Screech cleared his throat. "I happen to know San Francisco like the back of my hand."

"Perfect!" Megan said.

"Now remember, when you're in San Francisco, you're representing Bayside," Mr. Belding said.

Screech patted Mr. Belding on the arm. "Not to worry, Chief. I won't let them do anything embarrassing." Then, as he turned to pick up a napkin, he knocked over his glass of soda—and Megan's, and Brian's—until a river of soda was pouring off the table and onto the floor.

"And don't worry, Mr. Belding," Brian said with a grin. "We'll look out for Screech!"



The gang is off to San Francisco! Tommy has vowed to buy the perfect anniversary present for Lindsay, but he's totally broke. To make some fast cash, he and Brian pose as bellboys in their hotel.

Will Tommy raise the money, or just get himself into trouble trying? Find out when you read



It's the Thought That Counts,
the exciting new novel about
Bayside's new class!

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The New Class

May the Best Team Win

Smarts and Strength is on the air! A new game show that tests intellect and athletic ability, it pits high school teams against one another. And guess who's on Team Bayside? The whole gang!

Things go great during the first few competitions. In fact, it looks like they're a shoo-in for the finals! But then things start falling apart. Megan brags that she always scores the most points. Lindsay forces Tommy to study. And Rachel develops a crush on the show's host.

Meanwhile, Brian is working overtime at Pickin' Chicken, trying to earn enough money for a new mountain bike. He doesn't have time to rehearse for the game show, and he's falling behind in school!

Will the gang be able to pull it together for the finals? Is Brian's mountain bike worth spending his best years at Pickin' Chicken?

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